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The Washington Monthly

NOVEMBER 1991/$3.50

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How press conferences turn serious journalists into shills

by James Bennet

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LETTERS

Solid State

In 38 years in the foreign service, I saw a lot of the shortcomings that Harry Crosby ["Too At Home Abroad," September] describes. I subscribe to his view that consular work, too often belittled, is superb training for diplomacy. And no one can dispute his charge that the service remains deficient in foreign language capability despite credible improvement in recent years. But the problem with articles such as Crosby's is that the result is to malign the entire foreign service and lessen public respect and understanding for what it does. And that hardly builds the self-respect that Crosby says he finds lacking in the ranks of his colleagues.

I hope he stays with the service; anyone who writes so well should. Perhaps with time he will find, as I did, that on balance it still serves America with distinction—most recently in the ranks of those on the front lines in places like Kuwait, Riyadh, Tel Aviv, and Liberia. And, yes, in the visa mill at Nuevo Laredo.

BRUCE LAINGEN
Washington, D.C.
Mr. Laingen is president of the American Academy of Diplomacy.

Crosby has it partly right. The foreign service has all the demerits of a hierarchical and highly competitive federal or, for that matter, private, organization: instances of foolish pretension, risk-aversion, and a lack of self-assertion in the face of power. Crosby is also right when he calls for more initiative, more cultural outreach, more professionalism. With the end of the Cold War, the purely military and intelligence role in our foreign policy will decline. The defense and promotion of our country's interests will require an expert, aggressive foreign service.

But on the other hand, we haven't stood completely still. As a result of the Bremer Commission (of which I was a member), junior officers should now be processed from exam to recruitment in about an academic year. They will receive their career sub-specialty ("cone") assignments only after four years and thus can look the service over before requesting a specialty. Senior officers, starting in 1993, will have to speak at least one world language to be promoted to the senior foreign service.

My conclusion about Crosby's article, however, is not so much that I disagree with it but that I am saddened by it. I wish he would have more *fun* in his assignments; above all, I wish he had met (as I did) colleagues and bosses whom he profoundly admired and who could serve as examples of what he wanted to be when he grew up: a senior officer, too.

HUME HORAN
Washington, D.C.
Mr. Horan is president of the American Foreign Service Association.

Labor pains

Paul Glastris is right ["Labor's Love Lost," September] when he points out the shortcomings in Thomas Geoghegan's book, *Which Side Are You On?* The yuppies didn't cause the collapse of the American labor movement. But what was the real cause? On that question, Glastris is even further from the truth than Geoghegan is.

If Glastris's contention—that the inability of American corporations to compete globally is caused by labor—were correct, we would have seen vigorous growth in that ability during this period of declining labor power. But wiping out labor has only made the American economy worse. And in both Germany and Japan, the countries that are beating our brains out in the world markets, union membership is stronger and more universal than it is in this country. If it doesn't hurt those economies to protect their workers and it hasn't helped our economy to savage ours, how does he reach the conclusion that competing globally can only be achieved at the expense of the working man's paycheck?

If one really wants to locate the reasons for the failure of American corporations, he would do better to look not on the factory floors, but in the corporate board rooms and in our esteemed business schools. It boggles the mind that after American managers have led us into 40 years of failure, we still ask their advice on anything.

Finally, when Glastris claims, "What labor needs is a new justification, a persuasive argument that strong unions will benefit not just a slice of the working class but the country as a whole," he fails to realize that the working class *is* the country as a whole. We will not be a stronger nation when we are all working for the minimum wage. We will be like any other third-world country where people make their living by waiting on the tables of rich foreign tourists.

SANFORD THIER
Irvine, California

Dollars for scholars

In the July/August issue ["Tilting at Windmills"], Charles Peters claims that "academics" have salaries that "range from $75,000 to $200,000." I have read similar comments in *The Washington Monthly* before. But, in fact, as could be easily determined with a five-minute phone call to a reference librarian, in 1990-91 the average salary of all college teachers in the United States was $43,720. This data is printed yearly in *Academe*, a publication of the American Association of University Professors, based on data supplied by college administrators. In fact, of 2,530 colleges in the United States, the average salary at only *one*, California Institute of Technology, exceeds $75,000.

If I may add a personal example: I am a full professor at Oakland University who has taught for more than 15 years and authored four books. My salary last year was $42,000.

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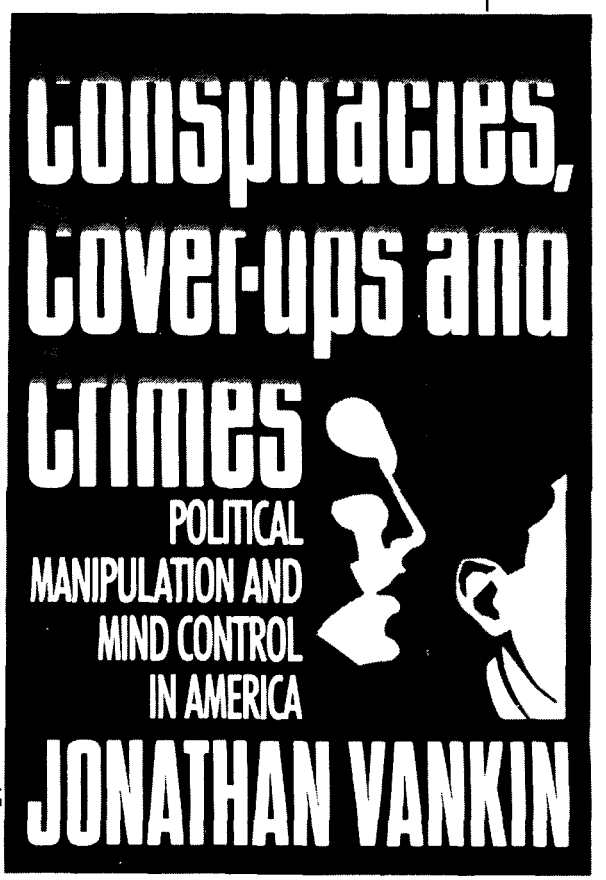

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The "information" printed by Peters could have been checked easily. Does *The Washington Monthly* just print whatever comes to mind?

ROBERT J. GOLDSTEIN
Rochester, Michigan

The editor replies:

At Yale the average professor gets $82,300; at Harvard, $89,600. My point was not that all academics make such salaries—I know Professor Goldstein is far from being alone—but that there is an elite class of public officials, journalists, and academics who are now earning salaries that tend to make them identify with the rich rather than with the average man.

Tilt?

I was astounded to see that your journal has printed an outrageous and groundless lie about my relations with William Casey while I was a serving military officer on the National Security Council staff during the Carter administration ["Who's Who," September].

You cite unnamed sources who suggest that I profited from President Carter's defeat and that, therefore, I might have been Casey's informant during the Carter administration. I had never met, seen, or even heard of Casey until he was appointed as director of the Central Intelligence Agency during the Reagan administration.

Not only do I flatly deny every aspect of such slanderous speculation, but I am appalled that you, a man who lived through the McCarthy era, would allow your journal to engage in such a McCarthyite practice today. You owe me and your readers an apology.

WILLIAM E. ODOM
Washington, D.C.

I worked as an intelligence analyst at the National Security Agency from November 1982 until June 1984. After I left, I kept in touch with friends still at the agency who told me how it had undergone subtle changes under Odom.

While working at NSA, I greatly admired the integrity I found everywhere I went in the agency. NSA was meticulously fair in analyzing foreign intelligence.

After Odom assumed command, I was told, agency reports began to tell the administration more and more of what it wanted to hear.

Odom was probably "mysteriously selected" to be NSA director because those who selected him knew he could be counted on to change the agency's staunch neutral focus to one more in keeping with the administration's biases.

In addition to being in on investigations of the Beirut Marine barracks bombing and the KAL Flight 007 destruction, I was involved in the Grenada invasion intelligence effort and remember reporting that there was no evidence to support the invasion, yet hearing the president lie about the threat to Americans and our national security. My guess is that Reagan's advisers were rankled by NSA's refusal to back up the desire to invade with phony "intelligence." Appointing Odom was a way to remedy that "problem."

ANDREW G. WEBB
San Diego, California

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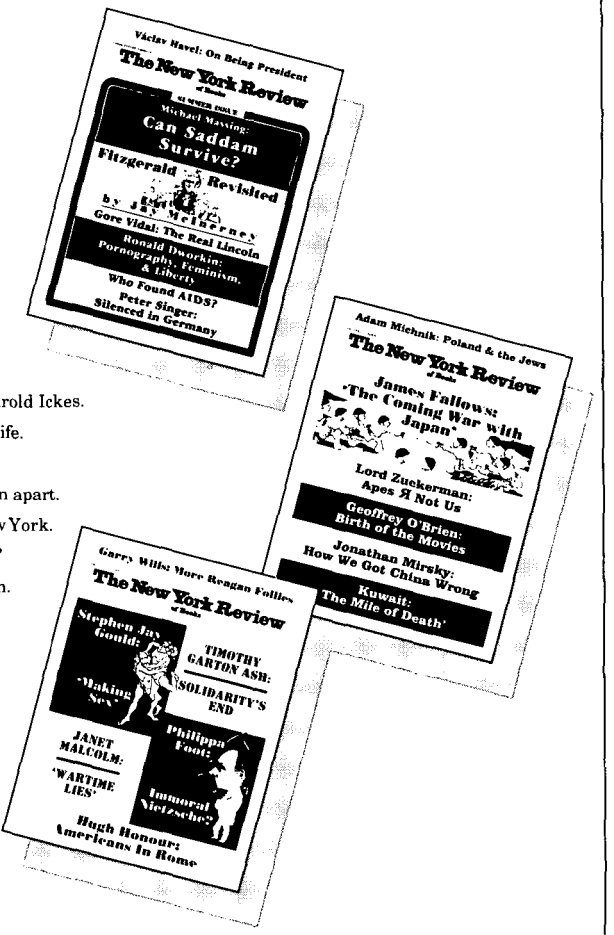

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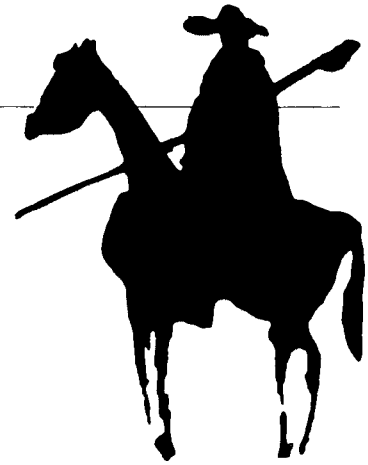
TILTING AT WINDMILLS



"Concluding testimony at hearings on his nomination to be CIA director, Robert M. Gates said yesterday that he gave incorrect testimony four years ago in defense of the Reagan administration's secret arms sales to Iran 'because that's what the administration was saying and I repeated it.' "

This was the first paragraph of *The Washington Post*'s Gates story on October 5. *The New York Times* story of the same day did not mention Gates's admission of incorrect testimony until the 22nd paragraph, and even then the *Times* omitted the crucial further admission that the false testimony was given "because that's what the administration was saying."

This failure of the *Times*, or to be more precise, of reporter Elaine Sciolino, was especially disturbing to me because I regard Gates's participation in creating and propounding the administration cover story on the arms-for-hostages deal—namely that the arms were given because of an alleged Soviet threat to Iran—as the single most damaging piece of evidence against his nomination to be head of the CIA.

Incredibly enough, the *Times* story did not even begin to suggest that the preceding day's hearings had contained a negative word about Gates until its 13th paragraph. . . .

The *Times* did better on October 8, reporting in a prominent position on its front page, as did the *Post*, the news that the teflon had finally rubbed off Elliott Abrams, who the day before had pleaded guilty to lying to Congress about Iran-contra. On this occasion, it was *The Washington Times* that missed the boat, devoting nary a word to the story until page three. It is not clear whether the paper's motivation was ideological or filial—it is conservative, and one of its editors is Abrams's brother-in-law, John Podhoretz. . . .

Next to attending meetings and writing memoranda, the biggest waste of time in the federal government is the clearance process, by which officials "sign off" on speeches, memoranda, and other documents. For example, before the president makes a speech, at least 17 White House officials have to clear the text. Often, as when the speech concerns the affairs of other agencies and *their* officials have to approve it, the figure can be much, much higher.

Some of this process makes sense. Errors are avoided because they are spotted by people who know things the speechwriters don't. But often, the long list of clearers is testimony to the egos of those involved or to the desire of the document's originator to curry favor with the people on the list or to get them to share the blame if something goes wrong. The result is in-boxes overflowing with what is in most cases nonessential paperwork that contributes to each official's self-pitying sense of being overloaded, stretched past human limit in service to the public. . . .

On May 25 the Associated Press filed this report from Miramar, Florida:

"A convicted rapist who was freed from prison last year in an early-release program broke into his victim's home . . . and raped her again."

On June 14, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that a California rapist—who had been paroled after serving only six years, just half his sentence, for raping a nine-year-old-girl—raped the girl again as soon as he was released.

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These anecdotes drive me to distraction for two reasons. It seems to me that, with the exception of crimes that will clearly never be repeated, parole and other early-release programs should be available only to nonviolent criminals. The violent have proved that they are a danger to the safety of their fellow citizens and should serve their full sentences.

You may disagree with me about that, but surely you must agree that, at the very least, previous victims should be notified when a violent criminal is let out ahead of schedule.

Tipton Kindel, a spokesman for the California Department of Corrections, defended his agency's failure to warn the now 15-year-old girl: "We can't presume that everyone wants to be notified."

I think Kindel is dead wrong. Of course everyone would want to know. The problem is that corrections officials just don't want to be bothered.

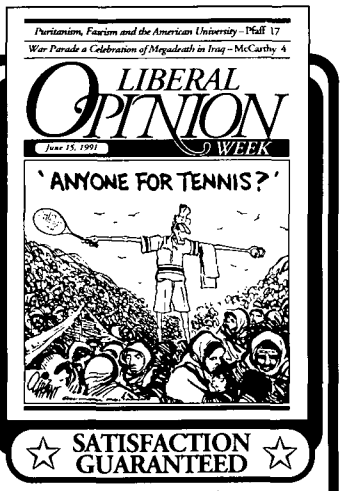
After all, they have more important things to do. Take the California deputy sheriff who spent a July night on a stake-out. Who were the vicious criminals the deputy was watching through his binoculars? Murderers? Mafiosi? Well, not exactly. They were a couple of kids diving for golf balls in a golf course pond. . . .

In the annals of government travel abuse, there are many credible claimants to the title of champion, but one agency has to rank as an early favorite for the 1991 title. In May, the Urban Mass Transportation Administration flew 105 of its employees, one fifth of its entire staff, to Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, for what Frank Greve, who broke the story for Knight-Ridder, described as "three days of deluxe lodging, schmoozing with the clients, and a night's free fun at the theme park." The cost was more than $285,000.

The employees traveled at government expense because, according to a UMTA spokesman, "all have specific work assignments in Florida." Their job titles included "traffic flow coordinator," "facilitators," "troubleshooters," "stage attendants," "bus captains," and "host/hostess," according to agency memos that went on to describe duties that included "ensuring that head table cards are placed properly." . . .

One of the exciting developments of the eighties, as many conservatives have noted, was that state governments assumed roles previously played by federal offices. Some claims in this regard may be exaggerated, but certainly this is not so in the case of travel abuse. Consider Carl Covitz, California's new secretary of business, transportation, and housing. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, California Highway Patrol records show that on more than 40 occasions during his first six months in office, Covitz ordered officer-driven patrol cars for his own use, including commutes between his home and office. The secretary also used a Department of Transportation helicopter to view a parade of soldiers after the Gulf war.

Covitz explained to legislators that it wasn't the parade he was interested in but how the traffic around it was being handled. He didn't explain how his wife, his son, and a friend of his son's, who were also in the helicopter, helped him evaluate the traffic situation. . . .



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But Covitz is a mere piker compared to the directors of BART, the San Francisco area subway system. From 1989 through July of this year they spent $145,000 in public funds on air fare, hotels, meals, and other expenses incurred while at out-of-town conferences. One director, John Glenn, found it necessary on four separate occasions to rent a private limousine to go back and forth to the airport.

"I will not leave my car parked at the airport," he explained to the *San Jose Mercury-News*. "I own a Cadillac and a Mercedes. They will be ripped off."

As for the directors' custom of sticking the public agency with hefty bills for dinner at such restaurants as New York's Windows on the World, Glenn, a true man of the people, explained:

"Whether I go for BART or go on my own, I always eat at the best restaurants. When I go to San Francisco [Glenn lives in San Jose], I eat at L'Etoile or Fleur de Lys, not Doggie Diner. I don't think the taxpayers expect me to lower my standards." . . .

It used to be that a public official would seek a protector—someone who could keep him from being screwed by jealous rivals or by a supervisor who might be jealous, irrational, or incompetent—from among other senior officials in his agency or from among congressmen or Hill staffers who oversaw his agency. But in recent years the list of possible protectors has been expanded to include influential members of the press. Why else would a Colin Powell confide so much in a Bob Woodward—see Woodward's book, *The Commanders*—if not to buy an insurance policy against the day a Brent Scowcroft or an envious admiral or general tries to derail his career by unfairly distorting the record. A good reporter friend like Woodward could be counted on to set the record straight. . . .

If you thought Scott Shuger was exaggerating when he argued in these pages (see the July/August 1990 issue) that the federal bureaucracy could be cut in half, please ponder the following fact.

In 1935, 1 in 4 Americans lived on a farm. By 1990, the number had declined to just 1 in 50. But the Department of Agriculture, which had 44,000 employees in 1935, has 113,000 today. . . .

The nomination of dim bulbs like Anthony Kennedy, David Souter, and Clarence Thomas manifests genuine contempt for the intellectual quality of the Supreme Court. If the president wants conservatives, okay. But give us people like Antonin Scalia and Lewis Powell who have the wit to write opinions that respect the best traditions of legal thought. . . .

When on one evening news show after another last month I saw those state troopers marching on the state house in Annapolis to protest proposed budget cuts that threatened their jobs, I realized that Maryland Governor William Donald Schaefer had mastered the Firemen First Principle that we promulgated in these pages years ago. Schaefer had wanted to raise taxes. Legislators refused, saying the governor would have to trim his budget. So what was the first cut offered? One of the most popular public services, the state police, whose members could immediately be organized into a persuasive lobby for restoring the cuts. Usually in such cases the legislature quickly reconsiders its folly; by the time this is printed, the cut will probably be restored and the irresistible appeal of the Firemen First Principle will once more have been illustrated.

Just in case the principle is still not clear to you, here is its textbook formulation: When a bureaucrat is faced with a budget cut, he should immediately announce that the cut will result in the elimination of a service that is either popular—recall how New York Mayor David Dinkins threatened to close the Central Park Zoo—or essential or, preferably, both, as is the case with firemen. The threat to reduce the service will usually produce enough public outcry to prompt the budget cutters to reconsider. There is a catch, however. In the unlikely event that the bureaucrat's bluff is called, he may feel compelled to actually cut the essential service, meaning that your house might burn down. . . .

One of the problems incidental to an official's dependence on chauffeurs is that when he leaves office, he can't find his own way around town. The wife of former FBI and CIA Director William Webster recently told a reporter that she's now acting as her husband's "living map." Whenever he calls from his car phone asking things like "How do I get to the Watergate?" Mrs. Webster has to give him directions. "He'd never been in a Washington cab," she explains. "He'd never seen the subway." . . .

It seems that the entire CIA needed a map, or at least that's what recent revelations suggest. According to the files of Stasi, the East German intelligence agency, most of the East Germans recruited by the CIA since the fifties were in fact double agents who were secretly serving Stasi. But it's now known that the situation was even worse with the

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CIA agents recruited in Cuba. According to Major Florentino Aspillaga, a 1988 defector, all of them were secretly working for DGI, the Cuban CIA. . . .

Much of the advice that wise old heads of the Senate give to junior members is statesmanlike. On occasion, however, a less clearly edifying note is sounded. So it was when one younger member I know asked a veteran what to do when he was tempted to compromise on an issue. "Well, if you're planning to go into the tank, make sure you go to the deepest part and stay there." Loosely translated this means that if you sell out on an issue, leave no doubt about your position. If you flirt with principle, you will only arouse hopes that are better left unstirred. . . .

Speaking of senatorial cynicism, if you have ever served in a legislature, you've probably been exposed to the following gambit. A bill is introduced that reeks of responsible regulatory intent. It might be called something like the Comprehensive Tobacco Control Act. It's usually too long for most of the legislators to read but it sounds worthy—and for some mysterious reason it doesn't even seem to have excited much opposition from the conservatives. So there is little debate, and it sails through. Later you discover it was in fact sponsored by the affected industry's lobby and was designed to preempt serious regulation.

The tobacco industry is in fact sponsoring such bills today in state legislatures around the country. I'm happy to report that the California legislature caught on to the con and, even though the bill had the backing of the powerful assembly speaker, Willie Brown, rejected it in September. . . .

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The Brookings Institution now says the defense budget can be cut by more than one third. And you can safely take that as a cautious estimate. Over my years in Washington, I've learned that Brookings and incrementalism are practically synonymous. Those fellows can always be counted on to recommend 5 percent when 10 or 15 or even more is possible. . . .

I never expected to rise to the defense of Dan Quayle, but I was distressed to see how little serious attention the press gave to the most important of his legal reform proposals last August: the recommendation that this country adopt the loser-pays rule now in force in Great Britain, which as a result finds it needs one-third fewer lawyers per capita than we do. I did not see a single report that gave the arguments for loser pays. (They appeared on page 43 of our July/August issue in "America: A Repair Guide.") And one reporter, the usually excellent Doug Jehl of the *Los Angeles Times*, actually seemed to buy the lawyers' argument that loser pays would hurt the poor. In fact, loser pays would help the poor by making it possible for them to get lawyers for meritorious suits that do not involve large amounts of money. If the poor person has been cheated by a car dealer, under the loser-pays rule he will be able to get a lawyer to prosecute his claim because the lawyer knows his fee will be paid by the dealer's insurance company and will not have to come out of the small amount of money recovered by the victim. Today, poor people find it easy to get a lawyer only when they have been badly injured, usually in auto accidents—because their cases involve such inflatable pain-and-suffering claims that the lawyer knows he will win a big fee at trial or else, if his case is dubious on the merits, get a substantial sum in settlement because the amount claimed is so large.

In other words, the current rule serves the poor only when big bucks are involved, but it does not help them in the large number of cases where the claims are worthy but small.

Still, the main good accomplished by loser pays would be the elimination of phony claims and dubious defenses that clog court calendars, prolong trials, and enrich lawyers but do absolutely nothing for the cause of justice. . . .

I was depressed that most of the defenders of Quayle's legal reform proposals were conservatives like Cal Thomas and William Buckley. Liberals were either critical, like Linda Wertheimer, or very quiet. It is a sad fact that in *The Washington Monthly*'s long struggle against the overlawyering of America, our fellow liberals have seldom been at our side. I suspect the reason is that many of them are lawyers and are thus not likely to be among the profession's more zealous critics.

Unfortunately, the legal profession has not been the only case where liberal identification with a group has made liberal criticism of the profession—even of its worst tendencies—much too rare. In the seventies, liberals failed to question the labor unions' aggressive pursuit of wage increases without regard to productivity increases, a pursuit that contributed mightily to the decline of American competitiveness.

The groups liberals are still reluctant to criticize are teachers and civil servants. In this sense, liberals have become enablers, encouraging the professions to resist needed reform. Thus, liberal reporters for newspapers and television stations tend to report the dismissal of bureaucrats with inquiries, not into whether any of the bureaucrats was inept or unnecessary, but into the pain of joblessness. The latter is of course worthy of attention but should hardly dominate the reporters' interest the way it has. . . .

The White House travel scandal of the year stars not John Sununu but Gary Walters, the chief usher, and Erwin Williams, the superintendent of grounds. In order to find a Christmas tree for the White House, they decided it was necessary for both of them to travel all the way to Oregon at taxpayer expense. Wasn't there a single Republican horticulturalist in the entire state of Oregon whom they could have trusted to pick out a tree? . . .

With state and local governments all over the country laying off employees, it is crucial (as we tried to point out in James Bennet's "Bloat People," September 1991, on D.C. Mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon's job reduction program) that the dismissals be carried out in a way that gets rid of incompetent workers and irrelevant jobs, not people who are talented and whose work is needed. But in the coverage of the reductions going on in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Ohio, Maine, Maryland, California, New Jersey, and Washington, I've seen no reporting about these matters.

The District's downsizing is going exactly as we feared, with no regard for the quality of the workers. Just look at the numbers: As we go to press, Dixon is expected to approve the abolition of 650 jobs. Of those, 300 are

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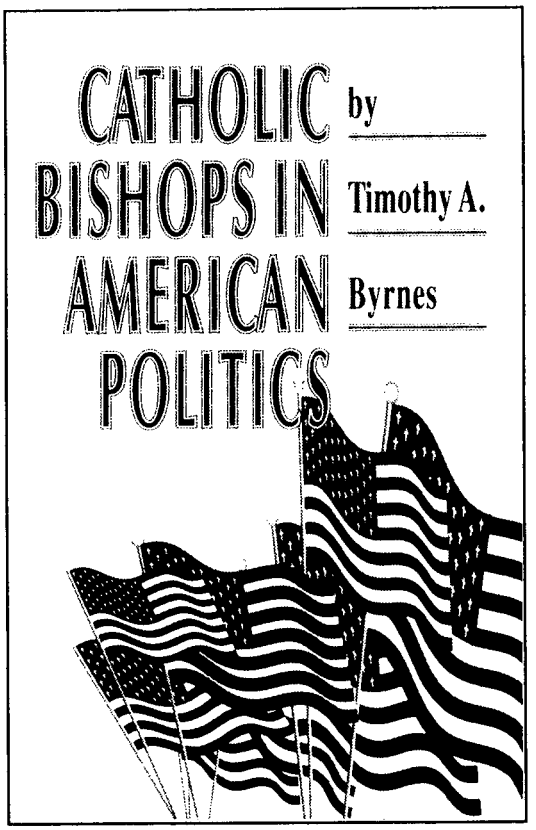

Over the past twenty years the American Catholic bishops have played a leading role in the anti-abortion movement, published lengthy and highly detailed pastoral letters on nuclear weapons and on the American economy, and involved themselves, collectively and individually, in several national election campaigns. Timothy Byrnes demonstrates that the key to the political role of the bishops and other modern American religious leaders has been political change, rather than religious revival.

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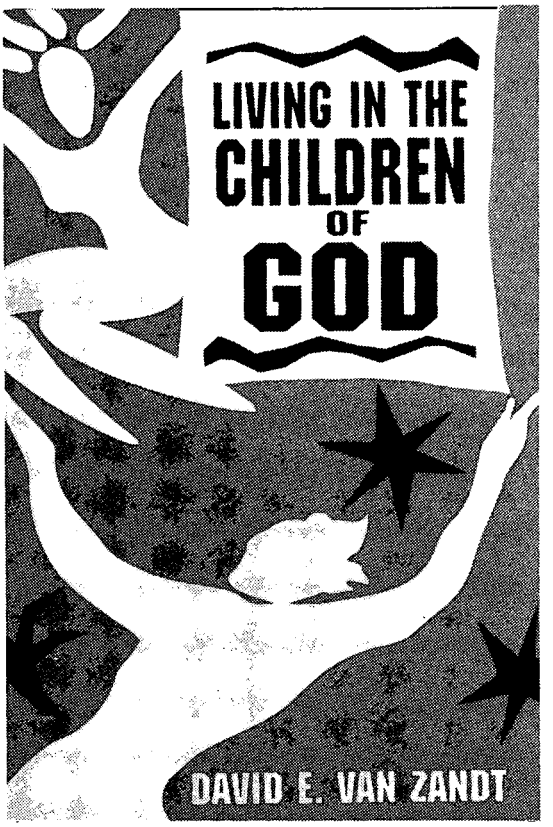

At the height of the religious ferment of the 1970s, David Van Zandt studied firsthand the most vilified of the new radical religious movements—the Children of God, or the Family of Love. First feigning membership and later gaining the permission of the Family, the author lived full-time in COG colonies in England and the Netherlands. From that experience, he has produced an informed, insightful, and humane report on how COG members function in what seems to be a completely bizarre setting.

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already empty. That means 350 people will be fired. But 400 workers have retired, taking advantage of the mayor's pricey early-out plan. And guess who the personnel office expects to take their places? Many of the same people who just got fired. Nowhere in any of this is there any mention of the quality of the workers. Are the people being fired bad? Well, surely not, or they wouldn't be being hired back. Are they good? Well, maybe, but surely then they woudn't have been fired in the first place. Most likely, no one has any idea how good they are or whether they're really the best people to replace the retirees. The bottom line is that it's the same shell game as before, and any improvement in the quality of the government will be purely accidental.

A story in the October 2 *Washington Post* on the proposed furloughs in Prince Georges County is an absolute classic of how reporters emphasize the jobless point to the exclusion of others. It ends with the tale of one worker: "Cindy Boyd, a recent widow who works as a paralegal in the office of child support, said the furloughs mean she and her two teenage daughters will be 'eating a lot more hamburger and a lot less steak. . . . What are single parents like me supposed to do when we are forced to take a day off without pay? I'm just trying to keep everything stable while putting away what little I can for my daughters' college. Something like this in the end winds up hurting the children. . . .' " Completely unmentioned is the effect of her work or her furlough on the kids whose child support she's supposedly overseeing. . . .

Only 4 of the 59 campaign donations made to California Assemblyman William H. Murray Jr. came from his district. Only $600 of the $31,150 he received in contributions came from individuals. The rest came from such public interest groups as the tobacco and oil companies, political action committees for lawyers, cable television operators, mortgage bankers, and horse-racing tracks.

Murray gets the lobbyists' attention by sending out invitations to fundraisers that include a tastefully printed card with just Murray's name and a list of the four legislative committees on which he serves. . . .

A study of 600 medical students at 10 medical schools stated that "nearly all . . . claimed to have experienced some type of mistreatment," including, according to a report on the study by David Perlman, science editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "being shouted at, being publicly belittled, being assigned demeaning tasks as punishment, being threatened with harm, and being graded unfairly."

As one who has been occasionally guilty of the first of these practices, I'm not indifferent to the efficacy of a bit of shouting now and then. But it does seem to me that our system of training physicians goes well beyond even remotely justifiable rigor and extends into the realm of the sadistic. This hazing, of which the overworking of interns and residents is a significant part, is visited by each generation of physicians upon its successor. It turns idealistic young healers into self-pitiers who take revenge by overcharging the rest of us and by treating the people they train the same way they were treated. . . .

Another serious professional problem in this country is teacher burnout. In a new book on the subject, Barry Farber of Columbia University's Teachers College reports that one out of two new teachers leaves teaching within five years. Teaching elementary and secondary school, where the instructor is on the firing line from four to six hours a day, has always struck me as one of the most draining of jobs. It ranks with physically dangerous coal mining and assembly line work, air traffic controlling, trial lawyering, and live television directing as the kind of activity that I can't imagine anyone enduring steadily over a long period of time. This is why I think we would be wise to fund a program of sabbaticals for the best public school teachers to try to keep them in the classroom as long as possible. Equally great is the need for a large-scale national service program that will bring the brightest young people into teaching, not as a career, which most of them wouldn't want, but for two to four years. As I discovered in the Peace Corps back in the sixties, that's how long they would enjoy the work and do it well. . . .

I was cheering Bush's nuclear disarmament speech until the point where he made clear that he still wants to keep the B-2. If you weren't persuaded by Scott Shuger's article in these pages (see "The Stealth Bomber Story You Haven't Heard," January/February 1991), consider the Air Force's own report that the B-2 has developed mysterious cracks and failed tests of its stealthiness. Why is Bush so attached to the B-2? Dick Cheney accidentally let slip one reason to *The Washington Post*: "We need a bomber that can strike deep into enemy territory and carry a large payroll—uh, I mean payload." . . .

—Charles Peters

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Why American Roads All Go to Pot

When it comes to building highways, Europe is kicking our asphalt

by Betsy Dance

Driving down New York City's hubcap-strewn FDR Drive is a little like bungee-jumping, that masochistic sport that requires you to tie yourself to a huge rubber band, jump off a high bridge, and pray furiously until you ricochet back up. Only bungee-jumping is more controlled. The FDR's drivers don't always have the benefit of knowing when they're going to plummet. They can't always brace before the car plunges into the abyss, but they usually know what hit them. Or actually, what *they* hit: a pothole.

Funny thing, though—millions of local, state, and federal dollars were poured into the FDR in the eighties. It's been closed for major improvements twice in the past five years. But like the rest of New York's roads, the FDR Drive somehow just keeps falling apart. In fact, in the next decade, state officials say, more roads will be closed for restoration than will be open.

Unfortunately, flooring it out of state won't help. Despite an annual outlay of nearly $80 billion, the federal government now classifies *one third* of America's roads as deteriorated. Washington, D.C.'s roads are in such a sorry state that, despite a repair budget that's quadrupled in the past decade, the city still boasts an astonishing $1.6 million backlog in street repair projects. And the cost of bad highways doesn't stop there. Traffic congestion, caused and aggravated by endless road repairs, costs this country $30 billion each year. That's *$30,000,000,000*. And those same people who can't get to work on time are stuck in cars belching noxious gases that are poisoning our air.

Our roads are allowed to get rocky by a remarkable web of disincentives for American road builders—in fact, federal policy virtually drives roads to ruin. Here's how it works . . . or doesn't.

Betsy Dance is a Washington writer. Research assistance was provided by Coates Lear and Elizabeth Pitofsky.

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When roads need to be built or substantially repaired, states contract the jobs out to industry bidders. But here's the catch: The best bidder never wins, just the cheapest. Let's say Sid mixes his cement with durable, non-porous polymers—the best in tarmac technology. His materials cost a little more, but his roads endure decades of stress and salt and ice. Meanwhile, Mack mixes his cement with run-of-the-mill, crack-prone, porous aggregate. Mack's cement is cheaper, at least before maintenance costs kick in, so he is awarded the multimillion dollar road contract. But if the road falls apart—hell, if it kills a dozen drivers while caving in—there's nothing the government can do. The way the federal law reads now, states are *forbidden* to have Mack guarantee his work.

In other words, the system's rigged so that if Mack's road starts looking like the surface of the moon, Mack won't care. That's why you should. Over the past decade, as federal highway expenditures actually decreased, no one seemed to be calculating the hidden costs of poorly built roads or overlooked repairs. According to the Office of Technology Assessment, delays and road repair expenditures often *double* the total expense of a road. We don't pay now. We pay big later. What's worse is that we don't have to.

Roads scholars

This multifold, billion-dollar damage is brought to us thanks in large part to a very simple scientific fact, a fact most seven-year-olds readily comprehend: When water freezes, it expands. When water seeps into the cement on a road's surface and freezes, the cement cracks. When no one fixes it, that's a pothole or a rut—or, if you're driving over it, an annoyance. In chilly Sweden or Alpine Germany, where winter is a way of life, you'd think such rough riding would be inevitable. But, mysteriously—or rather, not mysteriously—Northern European roads are usually as smooth as silk.

No one but the French would adorn the industrial-strength Autoroute from Nancy to Nice with miles and miles of flowers. Yet a driver can afford to sit back and enjoy the foliage, because he never has to worry about hitting a pothole. Despite a higher percentage of trucks (with heavier payloads than permitted in the U.S.), despite millions of travelers annually, there are virtually no crevices in the Autoroute —or, in fact, in most of France's major roads.

The reason is that France, like the rest of Europe, has over the past few decades made a concerted effort to build roads with an eye to the long haul—to spend early to avoid spending more later. They mix their asphalt with additives—rubber, carbon, polyethylene—to a far greater extent than Americans do. And they make wide use of new technologies like Novophalt, a polymer-modified asphalt binder that gives cement more flexibility and thus increases the pavement's service life. Novophalt, which Europeans began using enthusiastically in 1976, costs between 4 and 8 percent more than traditional asphalt, but it lengthens the pavement's life between 50–100 percent. Does this daring approach work? Don't take our word for it. Last year, visitors to Europe from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) reported, "The extreme forms of distress that are evident in many parts of the United States—rutting, raveling, cracking, and potholes—were, simply, rarely seen."

The reason for the continental difference is no mystery. First, European nations invest directly in road surface research to a much greater extent than we do. And, more importantly, they've managed to get the private sector to carry the weight. In Great Britain, for instance, a 40-year-life-cycle cost analysis is required for all pavement designs. In France and Italy, the government's contract specifications explicitly encourage contractors to make use of new, more durable materials —and the contract-award scheme freely permits an initial increase in costs for long-term gain. And third, contractors in virtually all European countries must guarantee their work for up to five years after completion. When they screw it up, they fix it up—a concept positively foreign to the builders of American roads.

Holier than thou

In the U.S., everything from federal specs to contractors' legal obligations conspire to ensure not just that today's roads are unnecessarily rocky, but that tomorrow's roads will look exactly like today's. Take Novophalt again. Thanks to stunning inaction among highway officials, it wasn't even sold in this country until 10 years after the Europeans started rolling it across the Continent. Now that we have it, we barely use it.

And it's not just Novophalt we're neglecting. In fact, as Europe forged ahead on road technology, America in the eighties actually slipped backward. Owens-Corning Fiberglass Corporation withdrew from highway and transportation research altogether. The research budget at the Portland Cement Association hit a 20-year low, as did the Asphalt Institute's R&D expenditures. Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company laid off more than 100 researchers; Chevron Corporation, a major asphalt supplier, cut its research staff too. The consensus among these private corporations is clear: Trying to transfer their technology to

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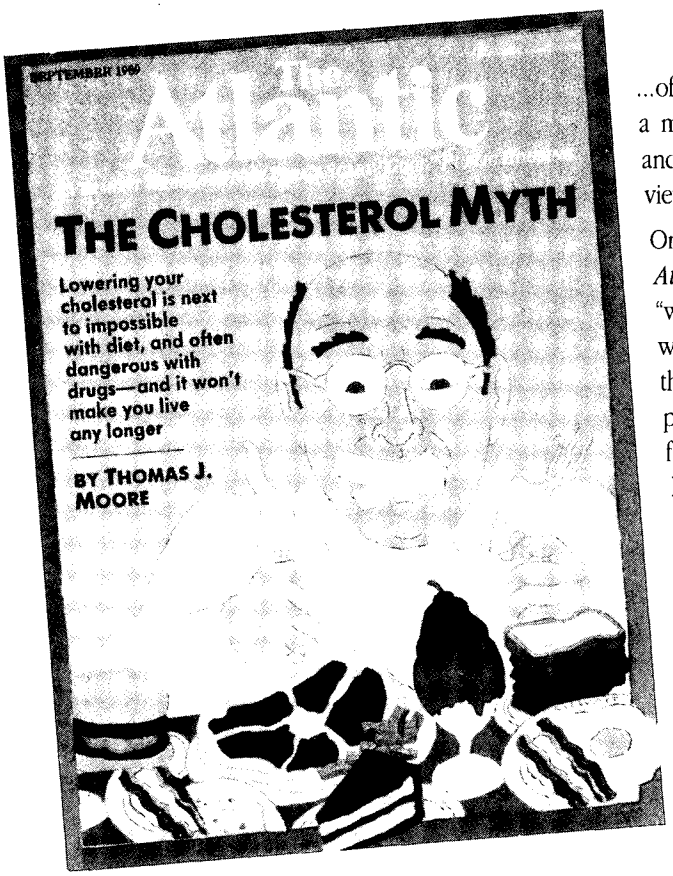

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the public sector takes far too much time, money, and energy, thanks to the absurd way the system is rigged.

In the U.S., private contractors bid to build roads based on state-mandated design and materials specifications. Therein lies the problem: State departments of transportation aren't known for bold, innovative methods, for perfectly logical reasons. A state *can't* consider the cost-effectiveness of new pavement technologies or equipment even if it wants to. To get federal money to build new roads, it must by law choose the lowest bidder. Needless to say, that low bidder's costs aren't going to be so low if he incorporates state-of-the-art materials or construction processes into his bid. And why should he shoot for finessed workmanship or product longevity if he doesn't have to guarantee his work?

Anyone who doesn't commute daily via the FDR Drive might make the disposable-road argument: Build it cheap, and if it breaks, fix it again. Problem is, thanks again to the federal funding process, that doesn't happen. The federal government provides money only for new construction. After that, the states and various localities therein are responsible for road maintenance. And upkeep is not a political priority—it's not as dramatic as a brand new road, no one pulls out the ticker tape, so no one wants to sink money into it. Despite the appalling condition of New York's roads, the state dedicates only a tenth of its transportation budget to repair them.

The structural disincentives are so real that even officials at the FHWA are beginning to get the picture. "Right now, [contractors] have no freedom to be innovative," acknowledges Doug Bernard, director of FHWA's office of technology applications. "If you're going to hold them accountable, then you're going to have to give them a role to play. We want them to be involved in the design and the construction, and in the selection of materials. We want to foster an environment for innovation." Unfortunately, that's not what American road builders want. And in the current political hierarchy, the millions of frustrated American drivers can't hold a candle to the powerful road-builders' lobby.

Highway robbery

One rare step toward better roads almost made it to the floor of the House this fall as part of the 1991 Surface Transportation Act: a provision that would allow states, for the first time, to require builders to guarantee their roads. The idea quickly won the support of the FHWA and the Department of Transportation. Also behind it were dozens of state officials and national advocacy groups. But the provision was excised in committee, thanks in large part to the vociferous objection of the Association of General Contractors (AGC) and the American Road and Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA).

Nick Yaksich, director of AGC's highway division, bluntly explains his opposition: He doesn't want to design roads, he just wants to lay them. "You get quality specs from the state and you build to those specs. That's that."

"I'm not sure it would be worth the effort," concurs T. Peter Ruane, president and CEO of ARTBA, adding, amazingly, "The current system, as far as we know, indicates that there are no problems." Last month, when California Rep. Anthony C. Beilenson reproposed a guarantee and warranty amendment, ARTBA whipped a letter off to Congress. "This concept is totally unrealistic," the letter read, arguing that if contractors guaranteed their work, they would suddenly become liable "for problems caused by faulty design or material specifications and other factors." And given today's rigid (that is, with regard to materials, *not* performance) state specifications, that's a legitimate concern. But hardly an unsolvable one—another lesson that can be learned abroad. In return for guaranteed work, virtually all the European governments have long made their design requirements flexible, freeing the contractor to use the best materials and the best design.

Smart federal policy would start by passing the Beilenson amendment and then encouraging states to loosen up their specs. But that's just a start. Real reform requires doing what the British do: Ditching low-bid requirements for long-term cost-benefit analysis. Those three changes would give road builders and pavement corporations real incentives to investigate new methods and techniques instead of just slapping down the cheapest stuff they've got. Would it pay off? According to the Strategic Highway Research Program, one of the few federally supported pavement research institutes, simply encouraging widespread use of chemical binders in asphalt—what the Europeans have been doing for years—could save $270 billion a year.

Smooth, black Ameri-Autobahns are possible *and* affordable, once we straighten out the twisted federal incentive system. We have the technology—or at least we can import it. We have the European model to learn from. All that is required now is political will. But we have a plan for building that too: a mandatory field trip down the FDR Drive for every single member of Congress. □

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WHO'S WHO

Is **James Baker** still going to bat for his Texas oil buddies? It seemed so last month when Baker, on a trip to the Soviet Union, sprinted from St. Petersburg to the oil-rich central Soviet Asian republic of Kazakhstan, three time zones away, to meet for a few hours with President **Nursultan Nazarbaev**, who is working on a deal with Chevron to drill off the Caspian Sea. Baker was accompanied by another notable Texan with friends in the oil business, **Robert Strauss**, the new U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union. Baker aides heatedly denied the 12-hour stop was intended to boost Chevron's fortunes. . . .

Senators who are also presidential candidates tend to be noticed when they let campaign activities interfere with legislative duties. Who's Who has already been tipped to votes that two aspirants have missed. **Bob Kerrey** skipped the close Senate vote against eliminating $3.2 billion from the B-2 budget, and **Tom Harkin** missed an important vote on extending unemployment benefits. . . .

Benjamin F. Schemmer of *Armed Forces Journal International* raises an interesting question about **Colin Powell**. If **Michael Dugan** deserved to be dismissed from his position as Air Force chief of staff last year for an indiscreet disclosure to the press, what should have been done about all the confidences that Powell shared with **Bob Woodward** during the Persian Gulf crisis that later appeared in Woodward's book, *The Commanders*? . . .

Woodward's colleagues at *The Washington Post*, executive editor **Len Downie** and managing editor **Bob Kaiser,** are the subjects of speculation by *Post* insiders. Will their longtime rivalry continue? It has occasioned at least two newsroom shouting matches in the past. The straightforward Downie is said to be the staff's favorite and, perhaps more significantly, **Donald Graham**'s as well. But Kaiser is gifted at getting under Downie's skin with subtle put-downs that exacerbate Downie's sensitivity about his non-Ivy League background. . . .

The White House has settled on **William Barr** to fill **Dick Thornburgh**'s job at the Justice Department, but not before it checked out some hardy perennials. Aides said former California Governor **George Deukmejian** was too ambivalent about the job and U.S. Trade Representative **Carla Hills**, another leading candidate, was too busy with the GATT trade negotiations. . . .

Why did the White House reject **John Danforth**'s proposal on the civil rights bill? Here was a respected Republican senator trying to make a reasonable compromise with the Democrats on an important national issue only to have his efforts dismissed by the White House without discussion. Danforth was asked if those responsible included **John Sununu**. He replied, "That's possible." . . .

George Bush's nuclear disarmament initiative was applauded by almost everyone here. But veteran observers were troubled by the small number of people he consulted in reaching the decision. As with the Gulf war, much of the decisionmaking was by just Bush and **Brent Scowcroft**. At its maximum, the decision group included only six other officials: **Dick Cheney**, Baker, **Dan Quayle**, **Robert Gates**, Sununu, and Powell. Similarly small groups have in the past produced such triumphs as the Bay of Pigs. . . .

How does a defense contractor react when its big ticket is in trouble? Well, one step Northrop took as its B-2 bomber was coming under attack was to add three new members to its board of directors: a prominent Democrat, **Joseph Califano**; a prominent Republican, **Jack Edwards**, formerly of the defense subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee; and a prominent retired Air Force general, **John Chain**, who was head of the Strategic Air Command.

If you think adding a few fellows to the board is a pretty inexpensive way to acquire influence, consider **Jack Valenti**'s. He gets his phone calls returned simply by providing influential Washingtonians with a free dinner and a preview of a new movie at the posh headquarters of the Motion Picture Association of America. . . .

Now that congressional honoraria are being phased out on Capitol Hill, the free trip has become, next to a substantial campaign contribution, corporate America's favorite way of currying favor with congressmen. According to Public Citizen, the leading beneficiaries in 1989-90 were (the number of corporate-financed trips each took is in parenthesis): **Norman Mineta** (26), **Norman Lent** (26), **Michael Oxley** (28), **Matthew Rinaldo** (28), **Bill Richardson** (29), **W.J. Tauzin** (31), **Jim Bunning** (32), **Dan Rostenkowski** (48), and **Charles Stenholm** (50). . . .

A press release from the Department of Labor about the marriage of **Lynn Martin**'s daughter **Julia** contained, under the heading "Fun Facts About the Wedding," such items as: "**George**, the chef from Peking Duck (the president's favorite oriental restaurant), will be at the reception to personally prepare his version of peking duck," and "A photograph of Julia in her gown is being used for a fall advertising campaign by **Scassi**." . . .

In—*White House*: Personnel Director—**Constance Horner**. Special Assistant and Executive Secretary to the Economic Council—**L. French Hill**. *State*: U.S. Ambassador to Zimbabwe—**E. Gibson Lanpher**. *Federal Reserve Board*: Member—**Susan Phillips**.

Out—*White House*: Personnel Director—**Charles (Chase) Untermeyer**. Deputy Director for the Office of Administration—**Hector F. Irastorza Jr**. *Education*: Undersecretary and Chief Financial Officer—**John T. (Ted) Sanders**.

—*Susan Threadgill*

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The Flack Pack

How press conferences turn serious journalists into shills

by James Bennet

It's 4:30 in the afternoon on the windswept lawns of the president's estate at Kennebunkport, and dozens of journalists are getting tired of watching the dog romp. At last, the president's men take their positions near the two vacant lecterns, the screen door swings open, and, as the reporters raise their notebooks, or steady their cameras, or crouch to extend their ungainly microphones, the president of the United States and the prime minister of Japan step into the sunshine. After the two men exchange some prepared pleasantries, George Bush looks out at the broad semicircle of expectant journalists and spreads his hands. The president's press conference of July 11, 1991—the 90th in a remarkable string of almost weekly duels with the White House press corps—begins: "Mr. President," asks Helen Thomas of UPI, "did the prime minister bring a check along? And have you solved the rice problem? And do you think that there's a growing anti-Japanese sentiment in this country?" Ah, democracy. Where else in the world would a mere journalist feel free to address the maximum leader, in the presence of a foreign dignitary, in such insistent tones? Where else would you find such pointed, immediate requests for information about the daily workings of government?

And why, given all that, does George Bush look so smug? "I can handle this one," he says, beginning to grin. "Before I answer the question may I say that I predicted with 100-percent accuracy who would ask the first question and what it would be."

If you're a public official and you have something to hide—corruption or dissent in the ranks, the dismal performance of your most touted initiative, or simply your slippery grip on current affairs—one of the best ways to do

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so is to call a press conference. A press conference will accomplish at least three things for you: It will prove you're not afraid of whatever it is you're afraid of, it will impart to your carefully prepared, artful answers the appearance of spontaneity and hence the warm glow of sincerity, and it will help keep that roomful of journalists, seemingly so intent on poking into your business, out of it.

The key to this guaranteed success lies in your ability to control the content of what looks like a completely unpredictable forum. Even the most seemingly contentious press conference is fundamentally a scripted event, with the roles to be played and the topics to be discussed clearly defined. Much to your advantage, the press is cast dramatically in the role of adversary, an appearance magnified by what John Quincy Adams once testily called journalists' "affectation of showing their independence." Who knows when those reporters might choose to leap for your jugular? Who knows what bones they might drag from your closet to lay at your feet?

Well, you do. While Ronald Reagan was president, much was made of his handlers' elaborate efforts to prepare for press conferences, from grilling their man ahead of time to carefully pointing out on a television monitor the journalists he should avoid calling on. That preparation paid off. "In press conferences, out of 30 questions and follow-ups the press would ask, we might fail to anticipate one," wrote the president's press secretary, Larry Speakes, in his book *Speaking Out*. "And often we could even predict which reporters were going to ask which questions."

Yet, despite all the frustration with the Reagan administration's success at "managing the news," there's nothing astonishing about that tally. "Everyone agrees that you can anticipate the questions," says one of George Bush's spokespeople. Jimmy Carter, who weathered his share of rocky press conferences, once remarked that "you can anticipate about 80 to 90 percent of the questions ahead of time." Jerry terHorst, who served as Gerald Ford's first press secretary, says his people did even better than that. "We scored 98, 99 percent of the time anticipating what was coming down the track by way of questions, and the one or two questions that surprised us tended to deal with easy personal things like 'Do you enjoy Camp David as much as President Nixon did?' or 'Do you use the bowling alley?' "

Such prescience is not confined to presidents and their flacks. After the Gulf war, one of the Pentagon's briefers, Lt. General Thomas Kelly, told *The New York Times* that one press conference ran so close to his rehearsal that he jokingly asked an aide if he'd slipped the practice questions to the journalists. "What was stunning was not what tripped me up, but how overprepared I was for the usual range of questions," says Hodding Carter, who served in what looked at the time like the hot seat, as Jimmy Carter's State Department spokesman. "I was always shocked by how essentially repetitious and narrow the questions were. . . . I cannot recall in three and a half years two dozen times that I was shaken—two dozen is too many. I can't recall a dozen times that I was shaken by an approach, in a sense caught unprepared, from a serious journalistic source."

Of course, the batter who knows when to expect the high fastball is going to have a mighty impressive slugging percentage. Which may be why the Pentagon during the Gulf war seized on press briefings as a key means of molding public opinion. And why Jimmy Carter, after leaving the White House, commented, "The best way a president can get his message through is obviously through the press conference." And why the only regret Michael Deaver, Reagan's deputy chief of

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staff, voices about Reagan's press conferences is that he didn't hold more of them. Partly because it gives the appearance of being the opposite, the press conference is in fact a powerful example of one of the great threats to independent reporting—slavery to the source. "In Washington, news more often than not is what officialdom says it is, and the press conference just makes that obvious," says Hodding Carter. No one wields the press conference to more deadening effect than presidents in general—and this president in particular. Thanks to the conventions of daily journalism, serving in its role as what Robert Shogan of the *Los Angeles Times* calls a "Potemkin opposition," a White House press conference is really little more than a session between a flack and a team of editors, honing a press release for the public's consumption: All the appearance of presidential accountability, with none of the unpleasantness of actually confronting tough issues like failing banks, wasteful weapons, or broken schools.

Reporters asked twice as many questions about the president's health—"Have you been gaining weight up here, sir?"—as about health care for the rest of America.

Tyranny of the status quote

White House correspondents say that their questions are predictable for a very good reason: "If you were covering current events and you had your eye on the ball, wouldn't you come up with the same questions as everyone else?" asks ABC's Sam Donaldson, Reagan's most skillful and persistent interrogator. "It would be surprising if reporters asked strange, off-the-wall questions, interesting as they would be." That sounds sensible enough—until you discover what "off-the-wall" means in the White House briefing room. A close look at the formal presidential press conferences held between the beginning of the Bush administration and the middle of September shows that only a handful of questions weren't yoked to the day's news. Reporters generally played to Bush's strengths, seeking blow-by-blow updates on the administration's (until recently) unchanging policy on Lithuanian independence and leaving almost unexplored vast, festering problems at home. Would it have been that off-the-wall, that far from Americans' immediate concerns, for reporters to have pushed the president on what he planned to do to strengthen the public schools (a grand total of four questions out of 1,865), to cut American dependence on foreign oil (only three questions), to bolster campaign finance laws (two questions), to address the problems of the B-2 bomber (one question) or the misery of homelessness (none)?

Since, as Donaldson suggests, the questions put to the president serve as a gauge for what the hot national stories are, the narrowness of their range is horrifying—even more so when you consider that the people asking them are among the best in the business. The trouble lies with the news organizations' decades-old approach to covering the president, an approach, simultaneously exhaustive and superficial, that has only been exacerbated by the rise of television. "Day after day, week after week, we wrote stories about the president playing golf, signing bills, and reacting," wrote Russell Baker in *The Good Times* of his stint covering Dwight Eisenhower's vacation for *The Baltimore Sun*. "The president might not be doing much, but [his press secretary] kept him in the news by having him react to people who were."

Two means suggest themselves for newspapers and networks to escape the White House press conference trap: Have the journalists ask better questions, or stop sending them altogether. Free them from having to respond to the president as he responds to the problems that everybody failed to anticipate, and put them to work trying to head off those deadly chain reactions.

Bush seems to understand this need better than the news organizations do. Queried at a press conference about whether the HUD scandal was encouraged by the Reagan administration's hands-off management style, Bush responded, somewhat helplessly, "Something might be happening in some department today that I know nothing about. We've got an enormous bureaucracy; we've got a tremendous bureaucracy that extends all around the world. And there might well be some corruption out there that's going on that I would be responsible for but that I don't know about." And that he's not likely to learn about, either—at least not from any of the dozens of inquiring minds in the White House briefing room. It doesn't take a great leap of cynicism to suspect that he kind of likes it that way.

Indeed, viewed from afar by an alien political scientist with a yen for conspiracy theories, the U.S. presidency would surely look like a dog-and-pony show—an endless round of fishing and horseshoes

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and iffy appointees and arms control talks—designed to distract attention not just from the corruption but, more significantly, from the actual performance of the government and of America's permanent governing class, the unelected bureaucrats. That's certainly the president's effect, in any case. There doesn't seem to be another explanation for why such savvy journalists would ask more than 10 times as many questions about the nomination of John Tower as secretary of defense as about specific defense programs, and twice as many questions about the president's health—"Have you been gaining weight up here, sir?"—as about health care or health education for the rest of America (six questions, total).

It's a flack thing

By the middle of September, Bush had held 103 formal press conferences—close to three times more than Reagan held in eight years. According to White House correspondents, one happy result of all this access is that reporters spend less time jockeying to ask a question in hopes that the editors back home or the sweethearts who dumped them in high school will appreciate just how important they are. "You always knew there was a press conference," recalls one Reagan-era flack, "because Helen [Thomas] got her hair done." With so many press conferences, and so few in prime time, the pressure's off.

But ask a White House reporter for an instance of a surprising piece of news that has come out of these press conferences, and you generally get a very long pause—and then an example from those notoriously scripted Reagan prime-time extravaganzas. There was the time Sam Donaldson asked Reagan for his opinion on Soviet intentions (Reagan replied that to achieve world revolution, the Soviets "reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat"). And the time Sam Donaldson asked Reagan if he believed Martin Luther King was a communist sympathizer ("We'll know about it in 35 years, won't we?"—a reference to when the relevant government files would be unsealed; according to Donaldson, the president's briefers had in fact anticipated the question, but no one believed Reagan actually planned to give the same answer on live television they had all giggled over in the White House family theater). The first of these questions came at Reagan's first press conference as president, the second in 1983. "You can almost make a case that you often get less information from Bush, because he's a master of appearing forthcoming without really telling you anything, so there's an appearance of accessibility, without the reality," says Michael Shanahan, who covers the White House for the Newhouse papers. Yet we still rely on the number of press conferences a president holds as an index of the openness of his administration.

While there was always the possibility that Reagan might wander out of the orbit of his handlers and say something surprising, Bush himself is his administration's center of gravity, very much in control. Indeed, when news has escaped a Bush press conference, the journalists present sometimes haven't noticed it whiz past. Bush held a press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Toshiki Kaifu in Palm Springs in 1989. "There were so many questions on Japan that you knew you weren't going to get one of those," recalls Timothy McNulty of the *Chicago Tribune*. "So I tried to think of something else. So I asked about settlements, which are in the news now. In my question, I asked about the West Bank and Gaza Strip. And in his reply, Bush talked about the West Bank and East Jerusalem." McNulty believes the substitution was deliberate: "It's a hard linguistic slip to go from 'Gaza Strip' to 'East Jerusalem.'" No one picked up on the comment—except in Israel, where it precipitated a crisis that led to the collapse of the coalition government.

Leave it to Deaver

"We don't find out anything they don't want us to know. In that sense, this White House has been almost leak-free," summarizes Carl Leubsdorf of *The Dallas Morning News*, who began covering the White House during the Carter administration. "But of course this president's giving us news a lot." *Giving us news*. Now, it's dangerously easy for a magazine writer to sit back and take potshots at other people's work. But there seems nevertheless to be something extremely troubling about that trade off, institutionalized by the press conference—although we may be learning only what they want to tell us, what they want to tell us makes for satisfactory stories.

Of course, to some extent that relationship is an improvement. Despite the affectation of independence that they have maintained since George Washington took office, newspapers used to depend on presidents for more than information. Some 56 newspapermen (Daniel Webster referred to them as "the typographical corps") were rewarded with administration jobs by Andrew Jackson. But more than jobs or printing contracts, the real form of currency between presidents and the press quickly came to be "news." Today's trouble arose because the application of that concept—"news" —widened greatly over the years. Thomas Jefferson may have fretted that Americans were treating their president like a king,

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but the first Washington correspondent wasn't even assigned until 1827. One hundred sixty years later, however, even the president's dog's puppies were considered a hot story.

Thanks to the laws of supply and demand, the president's skyrocketing news value greatly increased his power over the press. When Michael Deaver announced early in the Reagan administration that journalists could no longer ask questions at photo opportunities, the networks rebelled: No questions, they said, no cameras. The White House stood firm, NBC immediately caved, and the other networks shortly followed suit. After all, what network could afford to miss a shot of the president chatting with the leader of Sierra Leone? The rule is still in effect, with Bush enforcing it when he feels like it. "The pool of reporters that go into photo ops will as a general rule ask one question to see if the president will answer," says Susan Page of *Newsday*. If he doesn't, "they will generally back off."

Historically, the more a president chose to "give news," the better the press was likely to treat him. "The president has been more than cordial in his relations with the corps," wrote the Washington correspondent of *Editor and Publisher*, the leading trade journal, a few years back. "He has done unusual things and all but the few chronic kickers are hailing him. . . . The great majority of the correspondents have laid aside their axes and fine-tooth combs and are ready to do their share toward making permanent the program of mutual helpfulness thus established by [him]." Which president was he referring to? Warren Harding—one who desperately deserved the fine-tooth treatment.

With Reagan came the full flowering of the art of giving news, whether journalists wanted it or not. His press team—including Deaver, James Baker, and others—met weekly for lunch at Blair House to plot coverage of their boss. "I didn't want to be forced into somebody else's agenda," says Deaver. "I wanted to be able to program the communications parts of the White House in a way to tell our story. A lot of people call that manipulation, but my job was not to accommodate the media. . . . It wasn't hard to figure out that every president who had gotten in trouble in the past 30 years had gotten in trouble because he'd

The Outside Scoop

Okay, so maybe the presidential press conference isn't perfect. But the rest of the world would feel lucky to have it so bad, right? Well, not exactly. I spoke about the White House beat with Washington-based correspondents from 18 different countries, from India to Honduras, and heard a lot less praise than criticism. "The supposed openness you have in America, which I thought was great when I arrived, I now see isn't so great, because you tend to be confined to the [president's] plane," says Lionel Barber of London's *Financial Times*. "And that's where I think the foreign correspondents have a slight advantage, because you can roam throughout the bureaucracy. You drop in on the White House, and then you move on to the Treasury or wherever."

To be sure, none of the foreign journalists was at a total loss for kind words. Some expressed amazement at American reporters' willingness to confront the president and other high officials. Shin Sasaki of the Kyodo News Service, for example, recalled his shock when, during one of the debates of the 1988 campaign, CNN's Bernard Shaw asked Michael Dukakis if his position on the death penalty would change were his own wife raped and killed. "That would *never* happen in Tokyo," Sasaki says.

But most were not so impressed. "Issues go unchallenged here," asserts Barrie Cassidy, former press secretary to Australian Prime Minister Robert Hawke and now a freelance reporter. In addition to a parliament that grills the prime minister three times each week, he says, Australia boasts a much more adversarial press. "The first time I met Dan Quayle"—a man not unaccustomed to dealing with aggressive journalists—"he told me that he'd just been at the [Australian] National Press Club and that it had been 'just like walking into a bear pit.' "

Of those who have found American journalists aggressive, many argued that they tend to be so about the wrong issues. Like many of her colleagues, Monica Riedler of Austria's *Die Presse* is particularly puzzled by American journalists' fascination with the president's private life. "In Europe," she says, "you wouldn't want to know if someone's having prostate surgery." Similarly, several correspondents expressed utter disbelief at the U.S. press's obsession with the day-to-day operations of the Gulf war, which left the fundamental reasons for our involvement there largely unexamined.

A number complained that our press's failure to see the big picture allows the president to evade tough questions. "The follow-up is terrible," says one member of the foreign press who asked not to be named. "No given subject is pursued to the core, and the president gets off the hook. The S&L issue, for example, has been out there for such a long time, but the president's been spared having to address this problem, which may cost the American people $500 billion." This indignation from someone who doesn't even have a personal stake in the system.

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been put on the defensive. He'd lost control of the agenda, and I was determined that wouldn't happen to us."

At those meetings, the group would plan coverage over a six-week period, scheduling events to build on a certain theme over that time, then meeting the next week to fine-tune the unfolding program. "One of the best examples is the whole education reform thing," says Deaver. "We saw in '83 that education was one of the biggest negatives the president had. I think the ABC poll had the president at about 63 percent negative." So they looked for something positive to point to. "We found that we had this task force on excellence in education that had been out there working on this the whole time that nobody knew anything about. And they'd come up with five recommendations, and when we tested them we found that 80 percent of the public agreed with them." So Reagan began touring the country, visiting schools that were already doing the sorts of things the task force called for. "It wasn't a matter of getting them enacted, more going forth and highlighting where those things were already being done." The press dutifully tailed along. Regional news organizations jumped on the story whenever Reagan pulled into town. "We took about six weeks and literally turned the thing around. He was 65 percent positive by the end of it." The policies stayed the same—the president hadn't launched an alternative certification program for teachers, hadn't funded a new lunch program for the children, hadn't suggested a system for involving parents in their kids' education, hadn't created a national, after-school adult literacy campaign. He'd just changed the news. After all, the average correspondent wasn't planning his coverage six weeks ahead; he was reacting, daily, to the president's moves.

Prose and cons

Big news organizations are less likely to fall for Deaveresque tricks today. Recently, when Bush staged a media circus at a D.C. public school, ABC and CBS ignored it, NBC highlighted its cynicism, and *The Washington Post* gleefully savaged it on the front page: "The White House turned a Northwest Washington junior high classroom into a television

"Unsaid things are allowed to remain unsaid," says Enrique Merino of the EFE Spanish News Agency. "During the Gulf war, no one wanted to ask, 'What about all the killing?' "

What else would the foreign press inquire about? The New World Order, says Mario Dederichs of *Stern* magazine. "It seems to me that it's no more than an empty public relations slogan. Journalists, in my view, should not be transporting public relations." Relations with Beijing, says Norman Fu of Taiwan's *China Times*. From Italy's Ennio Caretto of *La Repubblica*: "Lots of European countries, especially Germany, have shown that industry can carry a large part of the burden of ensuring public welfare and still be competitive. Why is Bush still convinced that you can't make industry socially responsible without hurting competitiveness?"

So why don't the foreign correspondents ask these questions? Because they can't. If you broke the White House press corps into castes, foreign journalists would be the untouchables. They stand in the back of the room, their raised hands ignored except on the rare occasion that a high official from their own country is present. Interviews are never granted, phone calls never returned—a practice that does not hold for American reporters overseas.

Still, you say, they should feel privileged just to be here, since back home they'd probably never even get close to their head of state. Again, not true. Most foreign reporters noted that in their own countries, not only are there comparable institutions that allow the press to question their leaders, but reporters from *all* news organizations are given the opportunity to ask questions. "If you're not on the A-list," says Japan's Sasaki, "you never get recognized here, but in Japan, I'd say 95 percent of the reporters get treated equally." Dederichs says the same is true of Germany. "Sure, access is great here—if you're with the *Times*, the *Post*, or one of the networks."

Rest assured, not all foreign visitors come away from White House press conferences unimpressed. According to Colin MacKenzie of the Canadian *Globe and Mail*, when Prime Minister Brian Mulroney visited Reagan in 1984, his press people were "blown away" by the White House's ability to manipulate the media without holding regular press conferences. "Basically, what they took away was the idea that you didn't have to do these things." Since that visit, MacKenzie notes, Mulroney has held "two to four full-dress press conferences." He now prefers to "scrum" with reporters with his back to a staircase—up which he flees at the first unpleasant question, the way Reagan used to leap into a helicopter. These days, the home of the free press is giving lessons on how to control it.

—*Coates Lear*

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studio and its students into props yesterday . . . ." The story was a delightful piece of writing—you could sense the reporters' relish at finally striking back at the people who'd conned them for so long. Sad thing was, they were still falling for the real con.

The article devoted only one sentence to what Bush said about education—no sir, these reporters won't be suckered into writing the president's press releases anymore. But it devoted not a single word to what his administration was actually *doing*. Fresh, energetic teachers? Better lunches? Adult literacy? Who knows? Does anybody care? Not the White House correspondents, who could be setting the tone for the rest of their organizations' coverage. Instead, as noted above, in close to three years of press conferences, the self-styled Education President has had to answer only four questions touching on the American education system. And of those, at least two were asked, not by the regular White House press corps, but by regional reporters admitted for special briefings.

What domestic policy category ran second in popularity? Not the S&Ls. Not abortion. It was the nomination of John Tower, a subject on which reporters displayed stamina they usually reserve for secessionist Soviet republics.

It's not as if the White House correspondents wile away the hours with trivial questions. Certainly, some queries seem a tad goofy—"Mr. President, have you lost the broccoli vote?" "How many puppies are you going to have?" "Mr. President, on a quite different topic, the Oscars are this Monday, and I'm wondering . . ."—but those sorts of questions can occasionally generate entertaining stories. For the most part the questions are serious, straightforward—and reactive, as in the exchange at the beginning of this story. "Mr. President, what is your reaction to Mr. Gorbachev's counterproposal for troop cuts in Europe?" "How do you stand this morning about Fast Track? Do you think it's going to pass in both chambers?"

Take another look at those questions. In each case, the information requested is information the administration has a strong interest in getting out to the public. Here, for example, was Bush's answer to the question about whether negotiations on establishing a free-trade agreement with Mexico would receive "Fast Track" authority from Congress, meaning Congress would not tinker with the fine print: "That's a slow ball, and the answer is yes. Okay. Thank you for asking. It's very, very important to us . . . ."

"He uses us, just like every president before used us," says Greg McDonald of *The Houston Chronicle*. "This is sort of a game you play, we have a job to do, and we get used." It makes perfect sense for the press to serve as a conduit between the president and the people and foreign governments. Much harder to understand, however, is why it takes dozens of high-caliber journalists to gather the information, and why they should fritter away their few chances to question the president in order to do so. Let's say no correspondent had asked the president about Fast Track. Would the public have been denied the chance to learn his current position? Not likely. A briefing or press release would have quickly filled the gap, or, perhaps, at the end of the press conference, a weary president would have said, "Listen, fellahs, something that didn't come up, but that is very, very important to us. . . ."

Most of the questions aren't softballs, but, in searching transcripts of formal Bush press conferences from the beginning of his administration to the middle of September, I couldn't find more than a dozen questions not leashed to the week's news. This approach tends to leave out vast areas—needs, like job training, that don't burst into the public consciousness like coups, and disasters that haven't yet jumped to the front pages, like the mysterious failures of savings and loans during the mid-eighties. It's a longstanding habit of the White House press corps, one that contributed to one of the great journalistic sins of omission of all time. In November 1942, Rabbi Stephen Wise announced that sources confirmed by the State Department had informed him that two million Jews had been killed in Europe as part of a Nazi "extermination campaign." The news faded instantly away, and it wasn't broached at one of Roosevelt's bi-weekly press conferences for almost a year.

The questions asked by the White House press corps reflect little sense of history, even of the Bush administration itself, which allows the president to get away with a lot of cheap political tricks. Old themes, pushed by Bush at various points but then dropped, their political utility spent, are never resurrected by the journalists—even though all it would take is a "Whatever happened to . . . ?" At his first press conference as president, for example, Bush proudly declared, "I've been talking this week about ethics, and the emphasis is not, believe me, a fad or some passing fancy." Remember those days? At the

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same meeting, he declared, hilariously in retrospect, "I really am serious about this trying to get more of a bipartisan foreign policy." And then there's the flag issue, which consumed a couple of press conferences in the summer of 1989: "Burning the flag goes too far, and I want to see that matter remedied," Bush announced on June 27. Nothing less than a constitutional amendment, he averred, would do the trick. And then the issue vanished. Well, Mr. President, if the issue was of such momentous concern, why, more than two years later, have you done nothing about it?

The nonanswer man

Just because the questions spin off the day's events doesn't mean they can't be hard to handle. But, fortunately for the chief executive, he can simply choose not to answer them. During Operation Desert Shield, a journalist referred to a *Time* magazine article asserting that no cabinet official had a child serving in Saudi Arabia and that a disproportionate number of poor and minority soldiers were on the front lines: "Is this accurate? And if it is, why does this condition exist?" Bush gave a lengthy, passionate response. But the question Bush wound up actually answering went something like: "Mr. President, isn't it true that the Army discriminates and that we have the most unpatriotic, boneheaded soldiers in the world?" It's a bit more manageable. Bush started slow, but as he reshaped the question he gathered steam:

> I don't know about the proliferation of my cabinet and where their children are, but I don't have any service-aged kids myself. But I don't think this concept that this is a discriminatory army, or an army that is discriminating and thus sending more blacks to their fate—or minorities, Hispanics or something—is proper. I've heard it, and I reject it. . . . And if you don't believe me, believe Colin Powell. . . . This is an all-volunteer army; they're not draft-dodging. Remember Vietnam and the allegation, which I think had a lot of truth to it. But the kid that got disproportionately there was the guy that couldn't get the exemption and came out of kind of the lower rungs of society. This is different, totally different.
>
> And we ought to get you figures on this, because it is very, very important as to how high of quality this army is. And you'll read about one or two that say, "Well, I didn't sign up to do this; I signed up because I thought I could get a free education." He gets on the Phil Donahue show [laughter]—a big hero. But that's the tiny fraction of these kids that are over there. The morale is good, and they're motivated, and they're well-educated, and they're dedicated, and —if you'll excuse an old-fashioned reference— they're patriotic. And so, it isn't some cop-out armed services that they're now getting caught up in something that they were unaware of.
>
> I'm glad we got that one because I really feel strongly on that question.

Possible follow-ups: "OK, Mr. President, but to get back to the original question, isn't it true that there are disproportionately few children of wealthy Americans risking their lives in the Gulf?" Or "OK, Mr. President, but why does the fact that some wealthy Americans evaded the draft during the Vietnam War mean we should excuse all of them from serving now?" Actual follow-up: There wasn't one.

Even when a reporter does ask a tough question and doggedly pursues it with the one follow-up he is permitted by press-conference conventions, he will most often simply run smack into a flat statement of the president's preferred reality, at which point his peers will desert him. Consider this exchange between Bush and Owen Ullmann, of Knight-Ridder:

> Q: Can you explain why you believe it's all right for women who can afford an abortion on their own, that in cases where they are raped or in cases of incest, that it's permissible; but that for poor women who cannot afford abortions, it is not permissible to help them get abortions in cases of rape and incest?
>
> A: Owen, the only answer I can give you on that is to go back to the original Hyde amendment and to the position that I took and will stay with. And to some there might be a contradiction there. To me there is none.
>
> Q: Just to follow, sir: I mean, it's not a question of contradiction. It seems that if you can pay it yourself it's okay under those circumstances. But the message, it seems, is that if you can't afford it yourself—tough luck! And isn't that a moral conflict in your own position?
>
> A: No, I don't think it's a moral conflict in my own position.
>
> Q: Mr. President, could I return to Panama for an instant? . . .

Bush is also very good at using humor to deflect questions; it's a weapon he uses frequently, for example, against Sarah McClendon. McClendon writes for her own wire, McClendon News Service, and she has covered every president since Franklin Roosevelt; she is regarded by press officers as a bit of a crank. She makes a great deal of noise in the back of the room trying to attract the president's attention, and she tends to ask lengthy questions

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about domestic matters, sometimes a bit off the day's news. "Sarah McClendon is a classic, but kind of kooky," is the way one former White House flack puts it, changing his voice to a whine: "What are you going to do about the oyster problem in Louisiana?" Veteran press corps members also tend to dismiss her as a pest, and as a result overlook the fact that, mixed in with her speechifying, she often asks damn good questions—whether the president would comply with Rep. Claude Pepper's dying request that he provide home health care for incapacitated Americans, for example, or whether, in the aftermath of the Gulf war, he would "see that the United States and others quit selling arms." "I don't give a damn whether Brit Hume likes me or not—he's said some nasty things about me, that I'm an old fool," says McClendon. "But I'm going to keep asking my questions." She may be on to something with those questions, but it's unlikely anyone will ever follow her up. Here's how Bush and her peers have treated her on a couple of occasions:

> A: Who is that voice I hear in the back? [Laughter.] Could it be Sarah McClendon? [Laughter.] Sorry, it's a democracy.
> Q: Mr. President, I want to ask you about gun control. All over the country—
> A: Oh. [Laughter.]
> Q: —the parents and the people—now don't leave me, don't leave me. [Laughter.]
> A: Sarah.
> Q: All over the country, the people now are going to city hall about this . . . .

Bush's response was that he'd "like to do something about these automated weapons. . . . but I also want to be the president that protects the rights of people to have arms." He cut off her follow-up ("Sir, that's what we said last year, but now—") to add: "But Sarah, look at the laws on gun control and you'll find where some of the most stringent gun control laws exist, that weapons are procured there and weapons are used there. So you're not going to get me to do anything other than to say, Look, I'm very concerned about this . . ." The next question was about Salman Rushdie.

Another time, McClendon made the mistake of challenging Bush on his assertion that he was conducting his Gulf buildup policy in the open. Rather than refer to the complaints of "congressional critics," she took him on directly: "You and Jim Baker give the other countries a chance to talk and you give the United Nations a chance to talk but you won't give the United States people a chance to debate with you." Bush responded, "Well, now, that's an absurd comment, Sarah, from a bright person like you. . . ." Hard to imagine Bush getting away with patronizing Brit Hume that way.

Domestic whine

One of the mistakes McClendon makes is to ask about domestic policy. These days, it's done practically not at all. "To some extent, journalists, like Bush, think dabbling in foreign affairs makes them more important," says Robert Shogan. "And it's easier, because you can just make sweeping generalizations." It's hard to go after Bush on a specific domestic concern: "You have to force the issue and you have to make him look awkward. Very difficult to do, unless other people are going to back you up. But they're all waiting to ask about Iraq or some damn thing. Without that [backup], you look like a nut —you look like Sarah McClendon." (Surprisingly, reporters played to Bush's strength even during the campaign. "The amazing thing—during the 1988 presidential campaign, very few domestic issues . . . came up," says Sheila Tate, who served as Bush's press secretary. "It was interesting. When he went and gave an education speech at the press club, we got some good coverage—but I don't think we got a question on education again.")

Bush subtly stacks the deck to favor foreign policy questions. Of the 103 news conferences he'd held by mid-September, he staged 29 abroad or in the company of foreign leaders. In addition, journalists react to Bush's policy pronouncements, and Bush has chosen to emphasize foreign affairs. Yes, the developments abroad during his administration have deserved a great deal of presidential attention—but in most cases, they are the matters Bush has the greatest interest in speaking about, in order to inform the world of American desires and intentions. He'd find a way to get the word out.

Bush is understandably much less interested in wrestling with domestic details, like how he's going to address the scourge of AIDS (4 questions out of 1,865) or deal with what looks to be the next S&L crisis, the collapse of the commercial banks (2 questions). Out of all the questions between the beginning of his administration and mid-September, a full 1,225 were on foreign policy matters; only 637 were on domestic concerns. And that tally excludes press conferences devoted to the Gulf war.

When the press does apologetically turn its attention to the United States ("I just wanted to get one domestic policy question in here," was how one journalist tentatively brought the discussion home), the queries tend to be about personalities rather than programs and policies. In the past few months, for ex-

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ample, White House journalists asked four times as many questions about Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas as they asked in three years about affirmative action or civil rights. And can you guess what domestic policy category ran second in popularity to the status of the annual budget negotiations? No, not the S&Ls (22 questions—five of which were on whether Bush would hold onto William Siedman as head of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation). Not the state of the economy or what Bush planned to do about it (24). Not abortion (28). And not even the much-ballyhooed war on drugs (good guess though; it scored a 32). It was the nomination of John Tower, a subject on which reporters, displaying stamina they usually reserve for secessionist Soviet republics, racked up a whopping 41. As Woodrow Wilson once said of the correspondents at the White House, "Some men of brilliant ability were in the group, but I soon discovered that the interest of the majority was in the personal and the trivial rather than in principles and policies."

Besides hotly contested appointees, another favorite category of domestic policy question is exactly that—the domestic policy question: "Mr. President," asked a journalist during a press conference in Athens, "Cyprus is just the latest of a long list of complex, long-lived international problems that you've shown a personal interest in. There's a perception, fair or unfair, that you are not as engaged as you should be in some of the domestic problems that the United States faces. How do you account for that? And with an election coming up next year, what do you intend to do about that?" Instead of asking a pointed question about a specific program, perhaps a question informed by a little reporting, the journalist simply inquires vaguely about the domestic agenda, thereby throwing open the window to an amorphous, buzzing swarm of fly-by-night Bush proposals for the homefront: "I want, as you know, a crime bill. I want a civil rights bill." Etc. The next question, by the way: "Mr. President, going back to the region: Would you suggest a step-by-step procedure in order to solve the Cyprus problem?"

Beyond broccoli

The trick to profiting from a press conference is to go in knowing something, rather than trying to learn something. Hodding Carter describes the journalists he most admired at the State Department this way: "There were some guys that were asking me a question that I could not understand why they were asking, but I knew I was going to feel it up my behind. You know, he'd innocently be looking up at the ceiling and saying, 'Hodding, whatever happened to, you know, that position paper on the F-16?' And I would know that somewhere in the bowels of some agency we'd screwed up—and I wished to God that this guy hadn't found out about it."

Sam Donaldson argues, however, that that's not a White House correspondent's role—that the work of a House correspondent should be reactive, even shallow. "I'm talking about very simple, often superficial information, when it comes to the long march of history. Boy, if people can remember two questions I asked over the course of my covering the White House, I'm ahead of the game. I don't think it's the job of the reporter to go to a press conference saying, 'I'm going to show how smart I am,' " he says. "It's our job to find out what the president's reaction to the day's news is. . . . We're not going to care what Bush has to say [today] five years from now, but it's the story today. And tomorrow my job would be a different story."

Someone has to play that role. But it doesn't seem that readers, viewers, or—if you'll excuse, as George Bush would say, an old-fashioned reference—the country is well served by having the Sam Donaldsons do it: people who have demonstrated, as Donaldson has at "PrimeTime Live" and as his replacement, Brit Hume, did when he worked for columnist Jack Anderson, that they are capable of far more than skipping along the surface of the day's news, keeping the republic informed that PRESIDENT SPEAKS, PRESIDENT REACTS, or PRESIDENT DISSES BROCCOLI. As Donaldson himself once wrote, "After a while you catch on to the fact that the most insular, sterile place for a television reporter to be in Washington is in the White House press room." Many of the restrictions on coverage that the networks, newspapers, and newsmagazines found so odious during the Gulf war constantly constrain the journalists who work the White House plantation. The difference is that, in the case of the White House, the networks, newspapers, and newsmagazines are the ones who ultimately impose them. Consider again Russell Baker's experience covering Eisenhower. Although he dutifully filed his rote stories to keep his editors happy—"it seemed sensible for a new man on the beat to do as the old-timers did"—Baker's "first instinct was not to bother with it, figuring Baltimore could use the AP story if any of it seemed worth printing."

Today, an ambitious newspaper or network could take hold of Baker's notion—turning the play-by-play over to the wire services and CNN—and let the top-notch White House reporters spend some time digging around to figure out what the significant stories are. Before they trundled off to another of the president's foreign affairs seminars, those White

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House correspondents could put their reporting skills to work interviewing their peers—the Pentagon correspondent, the economics correspondent, the health reporter—to get a sense for what's brewing past the jump, for the simmering scandals or regulatory failures that haven't boiled over onto the front page yet. Not only would this strategy pump up the questioning of the president, it would help editors and producers spot the holes in their own coverage. Imagine if this conversation had taken place in the newsroom of *The Washington Post*, circa March 1986:

> WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: OK, George gave me some good stuff on the defense budget, and Michael had some suggestions on EPA. Am I missing anything? How about housing—anything going on at HUD?
> MANAGING EDITOR: Uh, well, we actually haven't had anyone over there since Howie went to New York last year. You might give him a call . . . and now that you mention it, maybe I should have someone swing by to just, you know, check out the last couple IG reports.

The rest would have been history. No such luck. As Howard Kurtz wrote three years later, after the scandals at the Department of Housing and Urban Development had finally caught his paper's attention, "[F]rom 1982 to 1984, I spent much time churning out stories of chicanery that in many ways foreshadowed the avalanche of sleaze to come. But most of these pieces were met with a collective yawn by the political and journalistic establishment. . . . In a city where the White House, Congress, and the State Department produce most of the banner headlines, HUD and similar agencies are viewed as journalistic backwaters."

Full court press

An even bolder plan of escape would be to leave behind just a few reporters to handle all the White House coverage. Forget the incremental solution of asking tougher questions, have the big shots turn in their White House passes, and dispatch them to fish the "backwaters" instead: Put today's Russell Bakers to work telling those tired stories—like the decay of the schools or the collapse of our health care system—in such a way that they *mean* something, so that not just the president, but all of us, have to sit up and take action.

And put the diggers to work anticipating the next domestic disaster. Take, once again, the example of the S&Ls. By the mid-eighties, evidence of the impending disaster was accumulating, most of it in stories of thrift failures confined to the business pages of newspapers around the country. And some people in Washington had realized that the central system would not hold. What was missing was the journalist who could put the two together. Getting a story like that means breaking away from sexy sources like the president and the secretary of the treasury, who have no desire to let the news out, and talking instead to the bureaucrats who inhabit Washington's windowless cubicles, people who generally have less loyalty to the administration than concern for the integrity of their agency—in addition to having a better idea of what the hell's going on. A low-level OMB analyst who oversaw the S&L's insurance fund once described to me what he discovered when he examined the numbers back in 1984: "It doesn't take a genius when these guys are taking billion-dollar hits and they have a six-billion dollar fund. . . . At the time we found out it was a $10 to $15 billion problem, and we thought, 'My God, this is a budget buster.'" Problem was, like a typical magazine writer, I found this guy five years too late. But, amazingly, no other reporter had *ever* talked to him. Maybe a roving White House correspondent, sprung from the plantation and scavenging for news, would have.

The most dangerous effect of all these correspondents' sitting around hoping to be granted news is that press conferences provide the illusion of accountability, thanks to the phony drama reporters have injected into them ever since Dan Rather got famous for leaping down Richard Nixon's throat. In Canada, the prime minister and his government must face parliament to answer questions *every day*. ("It's the only time our version of C-Span has any ratings at all," says Colin MacKenzie of *The Globe and Mail*.) In England "Question Time" comes twice each week. In those two cases, the questioners have both the information and the mandate to grill the prime ministers and their cabinet ministers relentlessly. They aren't members of a Potemkin opposition—they're the real thing. And they aren't sitting on the edges of their seats, praying to be given news for the sake of a 15-inch story; they're trying to find out whether the government is *working*.

The American system offers nothing that compares to that. Journalists can provide a critical counterweight to scheming National Security staffs or runaway federal loan programs, but not by shouting questions at press conferences. The only way they can determine if the government is working properly is to hang out with the Howie Kurtzes or, better yet, to roam through the bureaucracy themselves. Either approach is certainly worth a shot, since the White House press corps has nothing to lose but its chains. All it will take is the courage to break free of the cycle of dependency—to stop waiting to be given the news, and to start taking it. □

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How the Geezers Cashed in on the Gulf War

And why you'll pay for it

by Edward Ericson

Even if General H. Norman Schwarzkopf couldn't count on $50,000 speaker's fees or his reported $5 million book deal, the retired four-star would do just fine. As a general who maxed the pay grade, Schwarzkopf will take home *$1,028,953* in federal retirement in the next decade alone. If he had quit the service before the Gulf war, however, he'd be taking home thousands of dollars less—not because of his service there, but thanks to a little-noticed statistical fillip created by George Bush's blind faith in the free market. Of course, Schwarzkopf isn't the only one cashing in. As a direct result of Bush's oil policy preceding Operation Desert Storm, the U.S. government will spend billions of extra dollars in the next decade upping the pensions of federal workers from the general on down to the lowliest GS-2.

Each year, all 3,700,000 military and federal civil service pensioners receive an annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA). Even under ordinary circumstances, the bill for all these pension checks is staggering. Payouts this year alone are estimated at $56.5 billion, up three billion from two years ago. "I think it has something to do with inflation," a public information officer at the Pentagon offers helpfully. Problem is, inflation doesn't just happen. This time, George Bush helped hike it up.

Market forces are a complex product of popular mood and government action—or inaction, as in this case. Last August, oil prices shot up in the wake of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and fears of gas lines began to fuel a new national resolve to fight a war. At the same time, the Consumer Price Index, the government's main inflation barometer and the key indicator for the year's cost-of-living adjustment, shot up .8 percent, the biggest rise since the previous January. The oil price alone was responsible for about half of that increase.

But the oil shock did not last. A month later, President Bush opened the nation's strategic oil reserves, world oil prices plummeted to below pre-invasion levels, and inflation for the rest of the year retreated to a modest .3 percent. But by that time, irrevocable damage had been done. By failing to open the reserves sooner, Bush made himself responsible for $226 million in increased pension expenditures this year alone. Thanks to compounded COLAs, the outlay resulting from this brief increase in the inflation rate will probably reach $3

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billion by 2001—money that might otherwise have been spent providing balanced meals for 3.7 million poor pregnant women or treating 790,000 little kids to Head Start.

The lesson here is both particular and general. First, extreme, short-term inflation that can be stopped through reasonable market intervention should be—and quickly—to protect the American economy from unnecessary long-term costs. But more importantly, the consequences of Bush's inaction highlight the larger folly of across-the-board government COLAs. Designed to protect the widow's mite against the scourge of inflation, COLAs have evolved into an annual windfall for millions and millions of people who don't need them. In general, they're a dreadful strain on the Treasury. And on occasion—as in the case of Bush's preparation for the Gulf war—they're just billions of dollars down the drain.

COLA wars

To the public, the oil shock might have seemed inevitable: Saddam invades Kuwait, 6 percent of the world's oil supply is taken off the market, and Exxon Super Premium starts to levitate. It wasn't. The Strategic Petroleum Reserve, created in 1975 in the wake of the Arab oil embargo, was designed for times just like these. The day of the invasion, 600 million barrels of crude oil—enough to replace Iraqi and Kuwaiti imports for nearly *two and a half years*—were tucked in caverns throughout Louisiana and Texas, ready to stave off oil panic and keep prices stable when called upon by the president. But George Bush just kept saying no.

Despite the fact that U.S. oil companies were holding more crude in their inventories than at any time in the eighties, oil executives gleefully seized the moment. Within days of the invasion, they began ratcheting up their prices in the face of grumbling from oil experts, congressional leaders, and the press. "Open the reserves!" screamed *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. "Act now!" advised oil analysts from Daniel Yergin to Philip Verleger. But while the president demurred that he would "explore whether and when we and our allies should draw down reserves," his policy was unequivocal: As he and his spokesmen patiently explained, mere price increases were no reason for a drawdown. Only "physical shortages"—bone-dry tanks at Exxon—would justify the move. The result? In July 1990, a barrel of crude oil was selling for less than $18. By September, the price had doubled.

As the crisis deepened and the economic costs escalated, Bush faithfully toed the free-market line. It was not until October, when the price of oil had skyrocketed to a decade high of $40, that Bush began to comprehend the economic damage being wreaked by rampant oil speculation. Finally, he responded to common sense. He opened the reserves—a day late, $3 billion short.

Today, with a barrel of crude going for about $22.50, the Gulf war and its oil shock seem like ancient history. But some things aren't so easily left behind. Last year the government had estimated its COLA would be 3.9 percent. Thanks to the oil hike, it ended up paying 5.4 percent—the biggest increase in nine years. "The oil and gas increase had a cost that nobody has recognized," says Ed Herman, professor emeritus of the Wharton School of Business. "And this fed into the budget in ways that nobody has paid any attention to."

Hyper-pension

Why should attention be paid? The numbers speak for themselves—and those numbers were bad enough before the oil shock. In the civil service and military, the "unfunded pension liability" (the amount by which scheduled pension benefits exceed workers' contributions) now exceeds one trillion dollars. That's a debt all of us will eventually have to pay, through increased taxes or decreased spending.

The original rationale for decent pensions for government workers was noble: In exchange for what were then relatively meager salaries, workers could count on a comfortable, federally funded dotage. But as government salaries crept up in the seventies and eighties, pensions also kept on creeping. Today, the average civil servant can expect to earn two and a half times as much in retirement as a private pensioner, who, according to the Employee Benefits Research Institute, generally receives no adjustment for inflation at all. Yet after so many years on the gravy train, civil servants began looking at generous pensions not as compensation for low wages, but as a fundamental right. Inevitably, the annual cost-of-living increase became an intrinsic part of that expectation.

While few people bother to question it anymore, the illogic of COLAs is three-fold. First, they aren't applied year after year to a base pension figure, but are compounded annually, COLA on top of COLA. Say you start with a $20,000 base pension, to which a $3,000 COLA is added. The next year, the base figure is $23,000, not $20,000; your adjustment is a percentage of the higher figure—a difference that adds up. Second, and worse, COLAs are applied across the board to all pensioners, no matter how lavishly provided for. COLAs make great sense for the career

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GS-5 whose pension barely covers his apartment and cat food; in that case, an annual adjustment protects him from real economic misfortune. Problem is, Ted Kennedy will get exactly the same adjustment, even though he'll get a pension of $111,000 a year if he quits the Senate at the end of this term. With a trillion dollar liability, a $279 billion deficit, and tremendous social needs going unmet, that sort of "fairness" simply isn't fair.

Finally, COLAs are a self-fulfilling prophecy. When inflation prompts a rise in COLAs—as it inevitably does—it starts a chain reaction that leads to higher inflation, economists argue. "COLAs mean higher wages, and higher wages lead to inflation," says Laurence Ball, a Princeton University economist. "Simply put, COLAs magnify inflationary shocks."

What *is* fair? Means-test the COLA, as pension reform groups like the National Committee on Public Employee Pension Systems have long demanded. Under a reasonable system, the first $18,000 of a retiree's pension—and only that $18,000—would be indexed to inflation. While that baseline inflation-proofing would ensure that those who need COLAs don't have to skimp on Purina Cat Chow or the rent, it also ensures that COLAs aren't handed out promiscuously to Schwarzkopfs and senators with summer homes.

That single, modest step would reduce the pension liability by a formidable $500 billion and protect Americans from huge, unnecessary losses like the one we suffered before we ever made war in the Gulf. If we can't stop Bush's love affair with the free market, at least we can mitigate the far-reaching economic and social damage it will cause. □

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JOURNALISM AWARD

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Barry Yeoman
North Carolina Independent

Newspaper coverage of state budget wrangling often reads like so much fun and games: choleric activists, senatorial soundbites, lively lobbying, the high-drama vote. Which is why Yeoman's "Letter from Duplin County," in the August 21 issue, is such a sobering piece of work. Instead of scribbling in the corridors of the Capitol, he viewed the budget process from the grimmer vantage of North Carolina's Duplin County, where the depressed tobacco and textile industries have driven per capita income down to $6,072. Yet, as Yeoman shows, residents here know enough not to expect much from the annual distribution of spoils. Every year, state legislators sacrifice the small, politically impotent county—its drug treatment programs, its roads, its schools—to satisfy the more persuasive pleas of generous lobbyists and the affluent Research Triangle. More than quiet bribes or raucous scandals, Yeoman convinces us, state government's real corruption is a fundamental power imbalance that ensures that America's Duplin Counties will continue to be invisible and ignored.

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to the best newspaper, magazine, television, or radio story (or series of stories) on our political system. Nominations for any newspaper, magazine, or radio or television station in the country are welcome. The subject can be government in its federal, state, or municipal manifestation. Please send nominations to Monthly Journalism Award, 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20009. Two copies of the article or broadcast text should accompany the nomination.

Nominations for stories published or aired in October will close November 15. The winner will be announced in the January/February issue.

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TIDBITS & OUTRAGES

AND THEY CLOSED THEIR SHOW WITH A STIRRING RENDITION OF "IF I HAD A BEEMER"
In the patter between songs during a recent Peter, Paul & Mary concert, Mary discussed the addition she's having put on her house, and Paul chatted about his golf game.

YEAH, BUT THAT WAS 23 SECONDS OF *TOTAL SECURITY*
Because a technician accidentally hit the wrong key when loading guidance software into a $5 million rocket being used to test Star Wars technology, it had to be destroyed 23 seconds after it was launched. The programming error was evident before lift-off on computer printouts, but no one looked at them.

GREAT MOMENTS IN FACT-CHECKING
Both *The New York Times* and the "Today" show illustrated recent stories about the presidential aspirations of Nebraska Senator Bob Kerrey with pictures of Massachusetts Senator John Kerry.

JUSTICES DENIED
More than two thirds of those polled in a *Washington Post* survey could not name one Supreme Court justice, although more than half could identify the judge on "The People's Court."

TONIGHT'S TOPIC: FUNDRAISING DON'TS
At the federal prison in Rochester, Minnesota, a public policy seminar for inmates was attended by Lyndon LaRouche and Jim Bakker.

THAT WAY, I GOT OUT OF PAYING THEM THEIR CHRISTMAS BONUS

When you closed the deal on the Barrington estate,
I was grateful.

When you made my son a summer associate in your firm,
I was quite pleased.

The surprise party you threw for my fiftieth
made me very happy, indeed.

But when you gave my employees a Waterman for Christmas,
I was speechless.

You've finally impressed me, old boy.

Pens write. A Waterman pen expresses. For more than a century, this distinction has remained constant. The creation shown here, for example, has been crafted from sterling silver, painstakingly tooled and balanced to absolute precision. Those who desire such an instrument of expression will find Waterman pens in a breadth of styles, prices and lacquers.

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Ollie Oops

He says he's exonerated. The record says he's a crook.

by Peter Kornbluh, Malcolm Byrne, and Tom Blanton

At least until the appearance of "Oliver North—The Movie" or "Oliver North—The Senate Campaign," it will be hard to top the absurdity of North standing on the marble steps of Washington, D.C.'s federal courthouse last September after the dismissal of all charges against him, proclaiming himself "totally exonerated." Exonerated? "It's as though Ernesto Miranda had claimed that the Supreme Court gave him a character reference when it threw out his famous confession for crimes because the police had not read him his rights," declared *The New York Times*. Indeed, because of the type of legal loophole that conservatives deride for springing common criminals, North has gotten off for crimes that he proudly admitted to carrying out. Ironically enough, the same balance of powers that he so heedlessly tampered with saved his neck in the end.

But when the charges against North were dropped, the forces of revisionism immediately went to work. *The Washington Times* celebrated the event as proof that the Iran-contra scandal was the result of a congressional "fishing expedition to find something, anything, that could cut into then-President Reagan's popularity." The editorial board of *The Wall Street Journal* used the opportunity to bash Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh and to cast the prosecution of other Iran-contra actors as "a Kafkaesque ritual" comparable "to what used to happen to people in the Soviet Union." George Bush intoned that "the system of justice is working." In case you too are beginning to buy all this, it's worth recalling the ugly details once more—just for the record.

North was convicted in May 1989 of three federal crimes. In July he was fined $150,000 and sentenced to 1,200 hours of community service. But a year later, two Reagan appointees to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit outvoted a Carter-appointed justice to rule that, because North had testified under immunity before Congress in 1987, Judge Gerhard Gesell had to conduct a witness-by-witness, line-by-line review of the testimony to determine if any of the 67 witnesses had been influenced by North's immunized statements. When Robert McFarlane, North's immediate superior and the senior official responsible for the Iran-contra initiatives, told Judge Gesell on September 14 that North's congressional testimony had had "a very powerful impact," Walsh reluctantly threw in the towel, dropping all charges. (That move made it all but certain that Admiral John Poindexter's 1990 convictions on five counts will be similarly overturned.) So by giving limited immunity for his testimony in 1987, Congress in effect let North off the hook for the crimes he testified about.

But North's own words allow history to judge him, even if the legal system won't. Out of 12 counts, the jury found North guilty on three: Count 6, "aiding and abetting" the administration's effort to deceive Congress by writing false chronologies about the arms-for-hostages initiative in Iran; Count 9, altering and destroying documents by shredding; and Count 10, accepting an illegal gratuity in the form of a $13,800 security fence paid for by Richard Secord with monies raised from the arms sales.

On each of these charges, North—the man designated as the principal "fall guy" in the Iran-contra scandal, the one who volunteered to "take the spears in my chest"—had been grilled during the 1987 hearings by the lawyers and members of the select committees conducting the Iran-contra investigation; in each case he had openly admitted doing all these things, albeit with various justifications. Later, during

Peter Kornbluh, Malcolm Byrne, and Tom Blanton are senior analyst, director of analysis, and deputy director of the National Security Archive. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Archive.

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his trial, North called himself a mere "pawn" and pointed his finger at higher-ups in the Reagan administration—in fact, members of the jury later told the press that they acquitted him on nine charges not because he was innocent but because they believed he was authorized. As Denise Anderson, foreman of the jury, told reporters, "Basically, on the counts of 'not guilty,' he was following orders." But during the hearings North took personal responsibility for his own actions. "I am not here to make excuses for anything that I did. I have accepted the responsibility for those things that I did."

Count 6: The chronologies

In November 1986, amid daily headlines about U.S. government arms-for-hostages deals with Iran, Reagan administration officials panicked. North, Poindexter, McFarlane (who continued to play a role in the Iran initiative after resigning from the National Security Council), and others frantically began to construct cover stories. The primary goal of the president's men was to keep the lid on the most sensitive chapter of the Iran operations—the November 1985 shipment of HAWK anti-aircraft missiles from Israel to Iran. The CIA was directly involved in that mission, providing a proprietary airline to ferry the weapons and interceding with Portuguese officials who had refused to grant transit rights to the plane until they knew its precise cargo. The shipment was illegal; the CIA's participation took place without a Presidential Finding, which, according to the 1980 Intelligence Oversight Act, is required for any covert operation. To bury this political bombshell, U.S. offi-

The Beat-the-Rap Sheet:

It now appears that none of the government actors in the Iran-contra scandal will be significantly punished for his crimes. Consider the recent plea bargain of former Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams. Here is a man whose testimony before Congress in 1986 on illicitly raising money for the contras reeked of perjury—"I've heard [your testimony] and I want to puke," Senator Thomas Eagleton told Abrams at the time. But although the senator predicted "slammer time" for Abrams, he is unlikely to spend a day behind bars. Instead, when Abrams is sentenced on November 15 for two misdemeanor counts of withholding information from Congress, he will most probably join former NSC Adviser Robert McFarlane as another Reagan administration official who pled guilty to deceiving Congress and received only a manageable fine, probation, and a sentence of community service.

The two biggest fish to get away in the Iran-contra affair were Ronald Reagan and George Bush. According to the documentary record, both men supported the arms-for-hostages deals with Iran and both solicited third-country support for the contras. But neither man penned Nixon-like directives to his subordinates, leaving a convenient gap in the historical record. Instead, both engaged in a sort of Book-of-the-Month Club decisionmaking process: Their assistants regularly presented a catalog of deceptions and deals—and the president and vice president simply never returned the rejection card.

According to the record, some 40 top- and mid-level officials, including George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger and decisionmakers from every agency in the national security bureaucracy, share responsibility for various facets of the Iran-contra affair. Most escaped legal action, in part because of the decision by investigators to focus on the relatively narrow diversion issue, instead of broader questions of deceiving and evading the will of Congress. Still, so far a dozen individuals have faced criminal prosecution as a result of Independent Counsel Lawrence Walsh's ongoing probe, and more indictments are possible.

What has happened to those who actually stood in the dock? The following is a status report, based largely on information from the independent counsel's office, on the criminal defendants—some former government officials, some private citizens—in the Iran-contra scandal:

GOVERNMENT

➤**Robert C. McFarlane**: Pleaded guilty on March 11, 1988, to four misdemeanor counts of withholding information from Congress, after a plea-bargain agreement with Walsh. Walsh hoped to obviate a difficult trial against a high-level official who had tried to kill himself, apparently as penance for his misdeeds, and use the deal to turn McFarlane into a witness against North. But according to Jeffrey Toobin, a former attorney in Walsh's office, the deal was one of the independent counsel's worst blunders. McFarlane proved a virtual apologist for North on the stand. Then, at North's post-trial hearing on whether his congressional testimony had tainted his trial, McFarlane may have singlehandedly cost Walsh's office the case. Thus, in exchange for a sentence against McFarlane of two years' probation, a $20,000 fine, and 200 hours of community service, Walsh succeeded only in getting his most important case blown out of the water.

➤**John M. Poindexter**: After a jury found him guilty of five felony counts, including conspiracy and obstruction of Congress, McFarlane's successor as national security adviser was sentenced on June 11, 1990, to five concurrent six-month prison terms and a $250 court fee. Poindexter has appealed and, given the outcome of

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cials put together a series of chronologies entitled "U.S./Iranian Contacts and the American Hostages" that included in the final version the patently false story that U.S. officials believed at the time that the shipment consisted not of missiles but merely of oil-drilling equipment.

During the hearings, North said that, in the middle of falsifying the chronologies, Secord grew exasperated.

"General Secord said, 'That's not true. I'm not going to help anymore in this. I'm leaving,' " North recounted. "And he got up and left. And I continued to work on this version because I believed that that's what needed to be put out, because that's what Mr. McFarlane had given me."

"Are you saying that you decided it was appropriate to put out a false version of the facts," North was asked, "or are you saying that you decided it was appropriate to follow Mr. McFarlane's instructions?"

"I am saying that I decided that I would continue to participate in preparing a version of the chronology . . . that was not accurate. I did participate in that activity, wittingly and knowingly."

Count 9: The shredding

No one disputes that a "shredding party," as North described it to McFarlane, took place in the Old Executive Office Building, Room 302, as the Iran-contra operations began to unravel. Fawn Hall, North's secretary, testified that on November 21, after Attorney General Edwin Meese initiated what he called an "informal inquiry," massive shredding began: "To the best of my recollection it was early evening. I believe

What they did, what they got

North's case, appears likely to win a reversal of his convictions on a similar technicality.

➤**Joseph Fernandez**: On November 24, 1989, this former CIA station chief in Costa Rica had his four-count case of making false statements to official investigators thrown out after Attorney General Richard Thornburgh refused to allow classified information needed for his defense to be used in open court. (Walsh warned that this action "created an unacceptable enclave [the CIA] that is free from the rule of law.") On September 6, 1990, the Fourth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the lower court's decision.

➤**Alan D. Fiers**: On July 9, 1991, the former chief of the CIA's Central America Task Force pleaded guilty as part of a plea bargain to two misdemeanor charges involving withholding information from Congress. No sentencing date has been set.

➤**Clair E. George**: Based on information obtained from Fiers, Walsh indicted George on September 6, 1991. The former head of covert operations at the CIA faces 10 counts of perjury, false statements, and obstruction, to which he pleaded not guilty on September 12.

➤**Elliott Abrams**: On October 7, 1991, Abrams pleaded guilty as part of a plea bargain to two misdemeanor counts of withholding information from Congress.

NONGOVERNMENT

➤**Carl "Spitz" Channell**: The first person brought to justice in the affair, Channell pleaded guilty on April 29, 1987, to a single charge of conspiracy to defraud the United States by improperly using a tax-exempt organization to buy arms for the contras. He was sentenced on July 7, 1989, to what would become a standard punishment for Iran-contra defendants (two years' probation) plus a $50 fee.

➤**Richard R. Miller**: Channell's co-defendant, Miller entered a guilty plea on May 6, 1987, and on July 6, 1989, received a sentence of two years' probation, 120 hours of community service, and a $50 fee.

➤**Richard V. Secord**: North's principal agent in the field, Secord struck a deal with Walsh reducing his original multicount indictments to a single felony charge of making false statements to Congress. He pleaded guilty on November 8, 1989, and on January 24, 1990, received a sentence of two years' probation and a $50 fee.

➤**Albert Hakim**: Secord's financial partner, Hakim pleaded guilty on November 21, 1989, to supplementing North's salary, a misdemeanor. In addition, Lake Resources, one of the main companies in the "Enterprise," of which Hakim was principal shareholder, pleaded guilty to theft of government property in connection with the diversion of the Iran arms-sales profits to the contras. Hakim's sentence, handed down on February 1, 1990, was two years' probation and a $5,000 fine; he was allowed to keep $1.7 million of the illicit proceeds. Lake Resources was dissolved.

➤**Thomas G. Clines**: Although deeply involved with Secord in efforts to arm the contras, Clines ultimately faced four felony charges, not for those activities themselves, but for filing false income tax returns; he had omitted his income from the arms deals, along with other financial information. He was found guilty on September 18, 1990. Ironically, for these tax offenses Clines faces the longest prison term—16 months—of any Iran-contra defendant to date. His sentence, delivered on December 13, 1990, included $40,000 in fines, a $200 special assessment, and the full cost of prosecution. He has appealed the conviction.

—P. K., M. B., T. B.

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I probably—Colonel North probably opened the five-drawer safe and began to pull items from it, and I joined him in an effort so that he would not have to—wast[e] his time shredding. As he pulled documents from each drawer and placed them on top of the shredder, I inserted them into the shredder. At the same time, I asked him if I could go ahead and shred the PROF notes and phone logs. He acknowledged I should go ahead and do that, and I did so."

The quantity of documents was so great, Hall testified, that the shredder jammed and a technician from the NSC's Crisis Management Center had to be called in to fix it so the destruction could continue.

North claimed that he shredded documents "almost every day" as part of his covert operations. But under questioning by Chief Counsel John Nields, he stated: "I do not deny that I engaged in shredding on November 21." North explained that his shredding had begun in October, after an airplane carrying illicit weapons for the contras was shot down over Nicaragua. "[A]t that point I began to, one, recognize that I would be leaving the NSC, because that was a purpose for my departure, to offer the scapegoat, if you will, and, second of all, recognizing it was coming down, I didn't want some new person walking in there opening files that would possibly expose people at risk."

Count 10: The security fence

In the summer of 1986, a colleague of Secord's, Glenn Robinette, a retired CIA technical expert, installed a $13,800 security fence around North's home in Great Falls, Virginia. When North was fired from the NSC on November 25, 1986, he realized, as he later explained to Congress, that "I had accepted something that I had not paid for" and that this "just didn't look right." North called Robinette, who sent him two backdated invoices. North then attempted to create a false paper trail about payment for the fence by twice driving over to a Best Products store at a nearby mall to type letters on a display model typewriter. North subsequently gave those letters to Robinette.

Of all the issues of impropriety that came up during North's Iran-contra testimony, the security fence scheme is the one to which he most readily admitted. True to form, he offered a lengthy justification for his actions: Abu Nidal had "targeted me for assassination" and the U.S. government wouldn't expeditiously install a security system, so North turned to Secord for help.

"The security system . . . was installed by Mr. Robinette with General Secord's money, or the Enterprise's money, or Mr. [Albert] Hakim's money," North admitted to the committee. He confessed to "making a serious, serious judgment error in what I then did to paper it over. I did probably the grossest misjudgment that I have made in my life. I then tried to paper over that whole thing by sending two phony documents back to Mr. Robinette. . . . I have admitted to that. I am here to tell the truth, even when it hurts. Okay? They are phony."

True North

Toward the end of his appearance before the Iran-contra committees, North was questioned by Republican Counsel George Van Cleve, who reviewed his transgressions:

> VAN CLEVE: "And you've admitted that you've lied to the Congress; is that correct?"
> NORTH: "I have."
> VAN CLEVE: "And you've admitted that you lied in creating false chronologies . . . is that correct?"
> NORTH: "That is true."
> VAN CLEVE: "And you've admitted that you created false documents that were intended to mislead investigators with respect to a gift that was made to you; is that correct?"
> NORTH: "No."
> VAN CLEVE: "I think I understand the reason for your hesitation. You've certainly admitted that the documents themselves were completely false; is that correct?"
> NORTH: "That is correct."
> VAN CLEVE: "And they were intended to create a record of an event that never occurred; is that correct?"
> NORTH: "That is correct."

Oliver North got away with a lot; he emerges from the scandal legally guiltless, a national celebrity able to rake in $25,000 for a short speech. And North was not the only one to slip by. In the end, no one culpable in Iran-contra is likely to spend a day in prison, except possibly Thomas Clines, a former CIA operative who was sentenced to 16 months for tax evasion—reinforcing the Al Capone rule that you can get away with anything as long as you don't screw with the IRS. "No one," notes Jeffrey Toobin in *Opening Arguments*, his book about the North prosecution, "was convicted of diverting money from the Iran arms sales. . . . No one even stood trial for providing illegal assistance to the contras." Thanks to Congress's ineptitude, the lesson of Oliver North's case for future would-be government crooks is this: Just do it. Oh—and get a good agent. □

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Byting the Hand That Feeds Them

Information vendors are robbing the government blind

by Daniel Gross

You're the typical South Florida pensioner: You have both a heart condition and an inexhaustible interest in the weather. It's *so* hot, you complain to yourself, thinking nervously about the old ticker. But how hot, exactly? You pick up the phone and dial the weather, just as you've done for years.

"She's all alone in the tub," coos an alluring voice. "Jump in. It's wet." The recorded message continues: For $19.95, you can spend three minutes on the phone with a luscious, well-jacuzzied woman.

Has the federal government's weather service gone softcore? Not exactly. It's gone private. In many areas of the South, where the feds' National Weather Service has shut down its toll-free information lines, private corporations have leapt into the void. In exchange for a nominal fee—a year's worth of basic federal weather data costs about $3,500—companies are now permitted to charge the public for access to the very barometer readings and pollen counts that those citizens have already paid hundreds of millions of dollars to collect. To further increase their profits, those companies can sell space on the weather line for advertisements—some of which happen to be for phone sex. (You get your weather *after* the ad.) All of which adds up to a very profitable, low-cost deal for America's private weather industry. Thanks in large part to federal largess, 100-odd companies now rake in about $200 million annually from the sale of climatic information.

The above is one of the more titillating examples of a serious phenomenon: the privatization of public information. In the past decade, the federal government has increasingly come to rely on private vendors to disseminate the vast quantities of information it gathers, collates, loads, and stores in electronic

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format—everything from the number of building starts in Seattle to the health hazards posed by pesticides to the number of Detroit children who live in poverty. As a result, the American public often pays twice for government data: once for an agency to collect the figures, the second time for the privilege of perusing it—that is, if they can afford it. This market's invisible hand tends to prefer a select group of major corporations to tens of millions of curious citizens.

Consider AGNET, a nonprofit group based at the University of Nebraska that until the mid-eighties received crop and livestock statistics, export sales reports, and other agricultural data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Those figures were essential and affordable to AGNET's subscribers—farmers and researchers who paid a $50 annual fee and $30 per hour for computer time. A Nebraska bean farmer reckoning how much to plant this year could enjoy 50 hours of access to the USDA's database for only $1,550.

But in 1985, the USDA effectively granted a monopoly on the database's distribution rights to one of America's biggest info-corporations, Martin Marietta Data Systems. Under the agreement, the USDA simply gives the data, gratis, to Martin Marietta, which in turn sells it for $45 per hour, on top of a minimum fee of $150 per month. Under this system, 50 hours of computer time costs two and one half times what it used to. "I did one search to show some newspeople how it works," says Nancy Kranich, a New York University librarian and chair of the American Library Association's Coalition on Government Information. "It cost me $24 for one soybean price."

Of course, most of the database's current subscribers can afford the higher prices—because most of them aren't public-minded nonprofit groups. As of 1989, Martin Marietta's database had only 34 regular non-governmental users. Of these, half were news services like Knight-Ridder; the rest were commodity cowboys like E.F. Hutton, W.R. Grace & Co., and Quaker Oats. Unlike AGNET, these firms can absorb the higher access rates by passing them on to clients. But since AGNET's farmbelt customers couldn't afford the steeper charges for the use of the USDA's information, the network dropped the service altogether.

Maybe you don't care that a few small Nebraska bean farmers are planting blind. Unfortunately, you're still paying to use other government data—as a taxpayer. Come back into the weatherman's hot tub. Believe it or not, today, when the National Weather Service wants access to some of its own data and records, it must pay the multimillion-dollar private corporations that own it.

Yet why should the government spend bushels playing the cut-rate reference librarian to every poor farmer in the country? Indeed, it shouldn't. And it doesn't have to. Fair distribution of information should be available at low cost to consumers *and* the government. And while the free market has little interest in meeting that obligation to consumers, modern technology ensures that the government can—if it wants to. We have the know-how. But thanks in large part to a powerful information lobby on Capitol Hill and the complicity of the Reagan-Bush administrations, government has been content to let the free market serve the few at the expense of the many.

Information inflation

The elitist franchising of government information is a strange byproduct—make that unintended consequence—of America's computer revolution. Even in the logy federal government, information once stowed in binders and gunmetal files is now neatly ensconced on computer diskettes, magnetic tapes, and CD-ROMs—compact discs, read by a laser beam, that contain words and numbers, not songs. But while the government can store data in these configurations, most ordinary personal and business computers can't read it. What private vendors do is mold the raw data into a form that their customers can use. In so doing, they "add value" to public information and gain the right to copyright the final "product" and charge high prices for its use.

Those high-priced vendors add value to public information in any number of ways, some of them arduous and beneficial. For years, lawyers have had a choice between the federal government's low-cost texts of Supreme Court decisions and a more sophisticated, annotated version put out by West Publishing—the version many lawyers find worth the cost. Similarly, in its LEXIS database, Mead Data Central collects and indexes disparate bodies of case law and places them on an on-line database that also contains academic legal writings. But these are the great exceptions. Today, most information vendors' mark-ups bear little relation to the amount of effort, investment, or imagination the company adds—in large part because many have a virtual monopoly on that information and a captive corporate audience.

In the case of the agricultural database, Marietta simply takes data that the government has already organized and categorized and places it into an on-line format that its clients can use—a pretty simple computer task. Other info-vendors place bulk information into files in a pre-existing computer database. Again,

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nothing terribly complex. James Love, director of the Taxpayers Assets Project, a Nader organization, complains, "A high school student could write the software." Joe Sophomore should be so lucky: Because vendors have nowhere else to go for the information, that one program might reap tens of millions of dollars in profits.

In short, the government doesn't just hand companies a license to print money; it buys them the paper and ink to do it, thanks to a neat dovetail between that computer revolution and antigovernment Reaganism. In 1980, Congress passed the Paperwork Reduction Act, which directed agencies to cut costs wherever possible by using advanced electronic technology to collect, maintain, and disseminate information. The "Paperless Agency" quickly became the new bureaucratic ideal.

The Office of Management and Budget was charged with developing and implementing the broad project. In 1985, the OMB issued Circular A-130, which became the information industry's Ur-text. To save money, increase efficiency, and stimulate the economy, it read, federal agencies should henceforth place "maximum feasible reliance on the private sector for . . . dissemination of products and services." A-130 explicitly prohibits agencies from undercutting private enterprise by duplicating systems already available from the private sector. Under this new regime, federal agencies would continue to do the heavy lifting—i.e., gathering, storing, and processing data—at taxpayer expense, and then would make their loads available to private industry at bargain prices, or no price at all.

Lost in State

These were good tidings for the multi-billion dollar information industry, which boomed in the eighties. Currently, about one fifth of the 4,000-odd electronic databases available to computer operators consist of repackaged federal data. Mead Data Central, which runs LEXIS/NEXIS, tallied revenues of $31 million in 1980. Last year, the firm reaped nearly $440 million—taking home $34 million in pure profit. Info-glomerates like Mead, Dow Jones News Retrieval, and Knight-Ridder reap a significant percentage of their profits by gouging the public for access to the fruits of government labor. For example:

➤The National Trade Data Bank (NTDB), which synthesizes decades' worth of information on international economics and export opportunities, is sold in bulk on CD-ROMs for only $35. But while America's 1,300 National Depository Libraries—public reading rooms for government documents—receive the CD-ROMs free of charge, most lack the hardware required to read them. McGraw Hill's Data Resources Inc. adds value to NTDB data simply by translating the information into an accessible on-line database. But users pay dearly for the value added to the information: $80 per hour, plus 54 cents for each individual statistic retrieved.

➤In fiscal year 1991, the federal government will spend $51.5 million to maintain the Securities and Exchange Commission's EDGAR system, the nation's most comprehensive corporate disclosure database and one of the key sources of reliable information on a company's assets, debt, stock, and long-term plans. Once fully operative, the system, designed and run by Mead Data Central, will be used only by SEC staffers and by researchers at the nation's three SEC public information rooms, which are located in Washington, Chicago, and New York. Individuals unable to travel to the information hubs can gain access to EDGAR only through private vendors. Disclosure, a commercial vendor currently under contract with the SEC, receives the SEC data on paper for free, types it into a computer, and then charges its users $45 per hour, plus $20 for each record accessed. An investigator who calls up 10 corporate reports in an hour on Disclosure will have to shell out $245.

But even if you haven't the slightest interest in seeing the assets Drexel Burnham still controls, don't kid yourself. You're paying for the lack of access anyway. Because the SEC stores the EDGAR data in the raw form that most of its computers cannot read, the agency—that is, the taxpayers—will have to pay for access to its *own* data. Marietta translates the SEC data into machine-readable form, which it then copyrights. So under the terms of the SEC-Marietta contract, the government will never own a copy of the database in a useful format. Over the next several years, the SEC will pay Mead nearly $2 million annually for the privilege of searching and retrieving information the SEC collects.

➤The State Department recently condensed four publications—the *Bulletin*, *Current Policy*, *Gist*, and *Update for State*—into one: *The Department of State Dispatch*. *Dispatch* is now available on paper for a $75 annual subscription—more than three times the combined price of the four publications it replaced.

In February, the Computer Information Delivery Services (CIDS), which is owned by Martin Marietta and disseminates information for several federal agencies, began to carry *Dispatch*, as well as transcripts of daily press briefings, travel advisories, and James Baker's speeches, testimony, and press conferences. (Some material carried on CIDS no longer appears in any department periodical.) Since the State

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Department puts information into CIDS at taxpayer expense, Martin Marietta neither pays for its raw material nor adds value to the information.

And yet Marietta charges high prices for access. CIDS users must pay a minimum of $75 per month, an hourly rate, plus a charge of 2 cents per line for retrieving data. Marietta reaps further profits by selling the information to other vendors. For example, Mead Data Central pays the monthly minimum ($75), connects to CIDS for a few minutes each week, and pays the 2 cents per line charge when it converts *Dispatch* to the LEXIS system. Mead then collects hundreds of times, by charging $39 per hour, plus a per-search charge (ranging from $3 to $50), plus a 2 cents per line charge for data lifted from *Dispatch*. If Henry Kissinger wanted to find and retrieve a five-page article on the failed Soviet coup, it would set him back about 50 bucks.

But Henry had better act quickly, because the information he wants might not be around in a few months. Vendors are not required to keep backlogs of the information they buy and sell. After carrying it for a week, CIDS purges the State Department daily press briefing, which is no longer available on paper. This failure to preserve "unvaluable history" may be the most severe long-term consequence of privatization.

The $20,000 question

Since public information serves as the fuel for many vendors' money-making machines, the Information Industry Association (IIA), a heavy-hitting Washington lobby, works vigilantly to ensure the uninterrupted flow of cheap government raw material to its 800 member firms and organizations. IIA officials regularly testify at congressional hearings and work with state and local policymakers to encourage the passage of favorable legislation.

The IIA casts itself as a stalwart guardian of the public's right to know. "Whatever the government has should be available to everybody on equal terms. And at minimum cost," says IIA Senior Vice President Ken Allen. IIA literature is full of similarly uplifting egalitarian rhetoric. "Citizen access to information and a diversity of information sources are the foundation of U.S. democracy, unique among the community of nations," gushes Allen in one leaflet. Another industry agitprop warns darkly against "monopoly control over information held by a government entity."

As seen, though, many IIA members profit greatly from their virtual monopolies on public information. And the vendors see no danger if the government has a monopoly over obscure or unmarketable information. "Where there is not a marketplace value yet there is a public need, we certainly think the government should move in and offer the services," says Allen. In other words, the government should disseminate its information only when vendors cannot turn a profit by doing it. And preservation? "*Government* has a responsibility to preserve data," says Ronald Plesser, IIA's outside counsel.

This talk of "marketplace value" underscores the fundamental flaw in the privatizers' logic. At its most basic level, public information is an organic byproduct of the government's daily functions. Government exists, in part, to produce information. Public information is a national resource, not a commodity. And regardless of its format, it should be available, and usable, to both vendors and consumers at the price it costs the government to copy and deliver the information. Public access—and not private profit or cost-cutting—should be the animating spirit behind any policy covering the dissemination of government data.

Of course, the information industry isn't too worried that few ordinary citizens can afford its services. It knows who its real client is—big business. In fact, Plesser, a former Nader Raider, is getting a little tired of hearing about "every hypothetical graduate student needing some numbers."

Gregory Orman, a recent graduate of Princeton, was a non-hypothetical undergraduate student who needed a decade's worth of Federal Reserve Board data to research his honor's thesis. Until 1985, academics could obtain the tapes free of charge. But now the National Technical Information Service (NTIS), the Commerce Department branch that disseminates electronic information, charges $500 per tape. The necessary data would have cost Orman $20,000. A Freedom of Information Act request filed on Orman's behalf was denied on the grounds that he could have simply purchased the information.

Orman's case highlights the dangerous implications of the eighties' attitude toward public information. Even government—learning precisely the wrong lesson from privatization—is now willing to gouge the public for what that public pays to collect. But public, schmublic. NTIS has only 60 subscribers, most of which are large financial institutions and commercial vendors. I'd tell you who they are if I could afford to: NTIS charges $185 for the list.

Cheap data

It's so self-evident it shouldn't need saying: Instead of helping major corporations at the expense of economics majors, a good government ensures that public information is equally accessible through a di-

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versity of sources at a minimal cost. To realize how critical—and how economically possible—that is, you don't have to be some luddite longing for the days of the fusty archive and the accordion file. Nor do you have to go to Canada or Sweden or some other high-tech, high-humanity Valhalla. You simply have to locate the paragons of electronic access in the United States government—agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Institutes of Health, and a few branches of the Department of Commerce—where privatization is still a foreign word.

Using basic communications software on a basic personal computer, I was able to dial up Commerce's Economic Bulletin Board (EBB) and browse through files for 20 minutes free of charge. A habitual user can open an account for $35. Thereafter, the service costs $12 per hour during business hours, and $3 per hour after 6 p.m. and on weekends, with no extra charges for retrieval. The revenues EBB reaps from these modest charges—between $120,000 and $150,000 annually—more than cover the system's operating and staffing costs.

On the EBB, I leafed through the Daily Treasury Statement, which provides up-to-date numbers on the U.S. debt ($3.233 trillion as of July 9), as well as figures on how much the federal government has spent to date on food stamps, Medicare, and other social programs. In the Trade Opportunities file, I learned that Qatar's Department of Ports is seeking a U.S. supplier of portable well-drilling equipment. There's also a Gulf Reconstruction Commercial Information file—a referral service that describes ongoing United States efforts in Kuwait, offers advice on how to travel there, and provides phone numbers, addresses, and names of helpful contacts. The EBB contains files of recent National Science Foundation press releases, a list of Government Printing Office (GPO) publications, the schedule of Bureau of Economic Analysis release dates, and much, much more.

Curing the terminal illness

The EBB is a wonderful example of how advanced technology can make useful information available to large numbers of people at reasonable costs. And there's nothing to prevent a vendor from collecting this information, repackaging it, adding value to it, and reselling it. In fact, that's what I've done in this article. I took some government information, combined it with other information, and added value to it by putting it into a reasonably readable form.

Rep. Charles Rose has introduced legislation that would replicate the EBB on a broader scale. H.R. 2772 directs the GPO to set up a single point of on-line public access to a wide range of electronic federal databases. The GPO Window—a one-stop discount shopping center for public information—would be accessible to private vendors as well; companies would then have to truly add value, not just sell back to us what we built with our own funds.

The construction of the Window would take only a small federal investment—no more than a few million dollars. Most of that money would go for some relatively uncomplicated hardware, which would allow an outsider to gain access to all the existing databases. Agencies would still maintain their own databases, while the GPO would bear primary responsibility for opening them to John Q. Public.

The government sucks in an unfathomable amount of information. But not all of it has to be added to the Window immediately. The GPO could easily jump-start this project simply by consolidating the dozens of free-standing government databases that are already accessible through remote personal computers. And it could continue by placing on-line some of the most essential government publications, many of which are already digitalized. The first generation of Window products should include the *Federal Register*, *Congressional Record*, National Trade Data Bank, FEC campaign contributions, and *U.S. Reports*, to name a few.

Once up and running, the Window would pay for itself through user fees—just like the EBB does. Users would pay telecommunications charges and a modest on-line charge. The revenues would cover the GPO's costs for hardware, software, support staff, documentation, updating, and training.

The Window is an ambitious, even subversive, project, for it pushes the responsibility for disseminating information squarely back onto the broad shoulders of the federal government. "It gives the Government Printing Office an affirmative responsibility to disseminate electronic information," says James Love of the Taxpayers Assets Project. But advanced technology makes services like the EBB and the proposed GPO Window eminently feasible and affordable. Only a lack of political imagination stands in the way.

If the notion of the Window is not as sexy as a sultry-voiced woman in a hot tub, its pleasures would be a lot less fleeting: the promotion and preservation of information that lets ordinary American farmers, students, journalists, and other citizens see the same statistical world as the American elite. That's not a free market for information—just a fair one. □

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MEMO OF THE MONTH

[From Australia]

TO : Alastair Munro, Regional Manager Upper Yarra

FROM : Roger Payne, Director Hydraulic Systems

SUBJECT : O'SHANNASSY AQUEDUCT

COPY : David Knipe, General Manager

DATE : 05 September 1991

In reference to the reports received in relation to a leak in O'Shannassy Aqueduct, I would like to have accurate figures on the following :

- The exact number of Wombats in the vicinity of the aqueduct.
- The exact nature of the business of the Wombats surrounding the aqueduct, in particular their excreta habits.
- The breed/species of the Wombat that caused the environmental damage.
- To the closest mm the size of the destructive Wombat.
- The action to be taken to eradicate future wombat interference with this critical asset.

Please have this report in to me by 4.30 p.m. today as the Minister for Conservation and Environment has to be informed of the delicate situation. Please remember when compiling the report that the 'WOMBAT' happens to be a favourite of the Premier.

Roger

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Propheteers

Environmental problems are alarming enough without the doomsayers' exaggerations

by Gregg Easterbrook

Easterbrook's law of doomsaying holds: Predict dreadful events whose arrival impends no sooner than 5 years hence, no later than 10. That time window is near enough to cause worry, far enough off that when it actually rolls around everyone will have forgotten what you predicted. Thus in his influential *The Population Bomb* in 1968, Paul Ehrlich declared, "The battle to feed humanity is already lost, in the sense that we will not be able to prevent large-scale famines in the next decade." Perfect doomsay timing. Ehrlich won attention for his book; when the prediction failed to come true, no one remembered.

But then impending world famine was a trendy belief in the late sixties. Another best-seller of the period, *Famine 1975*, made the same prediction, using the same time-frame couching. Both volumes suggested that deaths from outright starvation would run into the many millions, perhaps even billions; that not even developed nations would be spared. Instead, though malnourishment continues to plague the Third World, mass starvation (which happened even in western nations like Ireland during the last century) has become virtually unknown in recent decades. Famines have struck mainly because of government policies during civil wars, such as in Ethiopia. World food production increases have consistently exceeded population growth, even in India.

In 1969, Ehrlich suggested in *Ramparts* that by the mid-seventies "smog disasters" would cause 200,000 Americans per year to drop dead, with "hundreds of unattended people choking out their lives outside of New York's hospitals." *The Population Bomb* declared that it was "not inconceivable" that some new disease arising from environmental conditions would kill 500 million people. The idea that India could "ever" become self-sufficient in food production,

Gregg Easterbrook is a contributing editor of Newsweek, The Atlantic Monthly, *and* The Washington Monthly.

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Ehrlich said, was a "fantasy." (India has been essentially self-sufficient in agriculture for more than a decade now, in 1986 briefly entering the grain export market.) *The Population Bomb* concluded by saying that because each new human being was just a little selfishness machine, the tax code should penalize those who have babies, with levies increasing after the first two. Talk about a user fee!

Of course many writers commit to print divinations that weather poorly. I've made my share, though I'm certainly not going to let on where to look them up. And it may well be that exaggerated warnings such as those sounded by *The Population Bomb* helped inspire the environmental reforms that staved off the effects Ehrlich feared.

One professor argued that it was wrong to have given antibiotics and vaccines to the developing world, because if peasants expired in traditional numbers, the rain forests would be secure.

So if something works for you, why not stick with the formula? Thus in his latest work* Ehrlich, a biologist at Stanford, joined by Anne Ehrlich, a researcher there, declares that "a billion or more people could starve in the first decades of the next century."

That is possible: Just because a gloomy prediction has failed to come true in the past hardly ensures it will not in the future. But in the field of environmental affairs, gloom predictions have a special status, and are often used as a substitute for careful thinking. That hardly anything Ehrlich predicts has come true (except population growth, a given) while he is still considered one of the world's foremost environmental prophets says something about the condition of ecological analysis.

Healing the Planet is a greatly different work from *The Population Bomb*. The latter was more like an extended *Parade* magazine article; the new book is chock with detailed technical explanations of environmental processes, reflecting that science, once seen as an enemy of environmentalism, is gaining status in that field. In the sixties, science was considered a vassal of the establishment, its practitioners devoted to inventing patent chemicals, nuclear devices, and rationales for raping the earth. Now that science has produced evidence of stratospheric ozone depletion and many scientists have become converts to environmental causes, the profession is viewed with more warmth. Cultural clue: Though Ehrlich is an accomplished biologist, in the sixties he usually identified himself as a "professor." Today, he calls himself a scientist.

Adding science to environmental analysis is a constructive development, but not, unfortunately, one that guarantees clarity of thought. In *Healing the Planet*, the Ehrlichs propose that science be used as a device to suppress thoughts that don't conform to a PC doomsday line. For example, they dismiss the conservative analysts Julian Simon and Ben Wattenberg, who have defended population growth, as "elements of the lunatic fringe." News organizations should not acknowledge cornucopian theories, the Ehrlichs argue: Though political and social reporting should contain the views of all sides, journalists should "recognize the limits to reasonable debate in the physical and medical sciences" by ignoring any views that are not alarmist.

The Ehrlichs certainly ignore them. Assessing why the imminent ecological catastrophes predicted in the sixties and seventies mostly did not happen (the big exception was Chernobyl) would seem a natural starting point for the Ehrlichs' 21st century predictions. Instead, they prefer to see the past two decades as one disaster after another. "The only major [environmental] surprise that was not entirely nasty," they write, "was the success of the green revolution in increasing food production in poor nations like India."

True, ozone layer depletion has since 1968 been confirmed, and this is unquestionably a nasty development. Indications of artificial global warming continue to accumulate. But by the same token, there have been many happy surprises. For example, U.S. air quality is now better by most measures than in 1968. Lead and smoke, considered the two worst air pollutants in the sixties, are nearly gone from the American sky; smog continues to be a problem, but has fallen relative to population growth, indicating that with further efforts, such as the new restrictions in last year's Clean Air Act, smog can be bested too.

Though in the past decade Americans have become aware of acid rain, during that same period emissions of sulphur dioxide, the cause, have steadily declined; the new Clean Air Act will cut them in half again. Throughout the Western world, use of CFCs, the main factor in ozone depletion, has been declining; a treaty signed by such greenies as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher will cause the compounds

**Healing the Planet: Strategies for Solving the Environmental Crisis.* Paul Ehrlich, Anne Ehrlich. *Addison-Wesley, $22.95.*

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to be banned by the year 2000. (The treaty imposed a 50 percent reduction; George Bush extended the number to 100 percent.) During the seventies and eighties, energy efficiency in the United States took a big jump, the key figure being that total BTUs consumed have fallen even as population and GNP output have increased. Since fossil fuel use is the culprit in the greenhouse effect, this is at least mildly encouraging news. Most measures of surface water quality have shown improvement—Boston Harbor and many other "dead" water bodies will soon be swimmable again—while drinking water quality has remained normal, despite fears that industrial toxics would seep into the water supply.

And since the oft-predicted "poisoning of America" has failed to materialize, it never will, toxics now being much more tightly regulated than they once were. For all the proclamations that chemicals are killing us—*Healing the Planet* predicts that "impairment of the earth's life-support systems could subtract a decade or two from the average person's life"—alarmists never seem to want to discuss the fact that on average people are living longer with better overall health, even in most of the developing world. It is now 13 years since Love Canal and Times Beach, and exhaustive public health studies of areas where toxics were grossly mishandled show that only a tiny number of people were harmed. That ought to teach an important lesson about not overusing the ecological panic button. This lesson is missing from *Healing the Planet*, which declares, for example, that "the nation is dotted with tens of thousands of Superfund sites." Actually the number of sites that may pose some danger is 1,245—which is miserable enough. Why exaggerate?

Immodest proposal

The bulk of the Ehrlich's analysis turns on world population growth. There can be no doubt this is a deeply troubling subject. The world population, now around five billion (300 years ago it was one tenth that number) appears certain to hit at least eight billion. Currently the United Nations predicts that a stability point will not be reached until there are 10 to 14 billion human souls. That not only means physical crowding in some nations but also more loss of habitats for nature; if citizens of the developing world are to enjoy anything like a decent material lifestyle, resource and energy consumption will increase drastically in the century to come. Therefore it is likely that even as pollution trends down in the western world, it will accelerate everywhere else.

As Paul Ehrlich wrote in 1968, in population dynamics "it is the relationship between the birth rate and the death rate that is most critical." What matters is not so much that more people are being born but that far fewer are dying, until old age. This transition is triggered mainly by 20th century drugs such as antibiotics and vaccines, which trump some of nature's checks on overpopulation. Perhaps the biggest single social issue in the developing world is that it is no longer necessary for parents to have 10 children if they want 3 to survive to adulthood and guarantee their old age; now of 10 children, 9 will survive to adulthood. Until that message sinks in to third world culture, population growth will continue.

One mildly encouraging note that has been missed in the media: Though the world population continues to build, the rate of increase has already peaked. Annual world population growth was 2.1 percent in 1969, 1.8 percent in 1980, and is 1.7 percent now. Unfortunately 1.7 percent annual growth is ample to create misery in many countries, but the decline in the rate of increase suggests that human expansion will not run unchecked forever.

In *The Population Bomb*, Ehrlich wrote that famine would replace disease as nature's population-checking mechanism for human beings. This hasn't happened, and with luck never will. But the notion points to a problem common to many ecological doomsaying accounts, namely the implication that it is good for people to die. At an environmental seminar at Harvard Divinity School two years ago, I listened to one professor expound on how it was wrong of the West to have given antibiotics and vaccines to the developing world, because if peasants still expired in the traditional numbers, the rain forests would be secure.

The Ehrlichs evince this kind of thinking when they say the United States would not need to import oil if its population had been capped at 135 million, the level of 1940—although "no one has ever suggested a sane reason for having even that number of Americans." I'll suggest one—people like to be alive. Isn't it interesting that Paul Ehrlich, who was born in 1932, picks as his moment for slamming the door on new children a year after he himself arrived? Possessing the gift of life yourself, it's easy to intone that others should be denied the privilege. And though environmentalists sometimes counter this objection by saying that human population control would help make the Earth a more rewarding place to live, a powerful argument, there is a self-centered aspect to such thinking—that population control will ensure there are resources, land, and pleasantly rustic parks for us, the chosen.

The Ehrlichs declare that "the essential strategy for saving biodiversity and ourselves [is to] reduce the scale of human enterprise." Fair enough, but have

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the Ehrlichs personally followed that prescription? Do they, for example, decline to appear at environmental conferences because doing so would require them to fly in resource-consuming jets and stay at input-intensive hotels? You know the answer. At the other extreme are those like Julian Simon, who say that because every arrival on earth increases the sum of human brainpower that can be applied to solving the world's problems, there can never be too many people. Probably the Earth can support more souls than it does today, perhaps with reasonable ecological protection, and at a reasonable standard of living for all. But until there is some fundamental shift in the equality of nations, to think that each new child born into poverty on the streets of Jakarta or Manila is a cause for celebration seems as far removed from reality as supposing population ought to be capped by some unspecified force.

Perhaps there is a middle ground between blind optimism and doomsaying—one the Ehrlichs, suspicious of human enterprise, fail to come to terms with. According to a recent study by a former State Department agricultural analyst, Dennis Avery, since 1968 annual world grain production has grown by 60 percent; excess food stocks relative to consumption have grown faster than the population for 30 years running. India had 19.5 million tons of grain held in stockpile last year. Of course, malnutrition exists even in a world with excess food. The problem, Avery asserts, is distributing and paying for the food, not producing it—still a significant dilemma, as famine in Ethiopia and the Sudan attest, but one that may be open to solution.

The Ehrlichs take a predictably gloomy approach to agricultural production increases, declaring they have been made possible only by plowing under too much land and that, anyway, "the end of the expansion" has been reached because adding more pesticides, herbicides, and irrigation water is no longer practical. The latter is true, but neatly overlooks several major trends in agriculture—managing insects through knowledge of their lifecycles rather than chemicals (market forces are pressing for this, since pesticides are expensive), new plant strains that need less water, and genetic engineering. Anyone who fears gene modification, easier in plants than animals, should bear in mind that its first practical impact on society should be to reduce the need for food chemicals, by producing seeds bearing genetic resistance to diseases and pests.

In *The Population Bomb*, Paul Ehrlich went so far as to predict that "we are depleting the world's supply of oxygen by burning vast quantities of fossil fuels and by clearing iron-rich tropical soils in which the iron is then oxidized." Two decades later, with every possible environmental doom story in print, no one has again suggested there will be an oxygen shortage. The Ehrlichs have abandoned this idea in *Healing the Planet*.

But why isn't the world running out of oxygen? After all, the stuff is being burned up in fuel combustion while plants, the sole source, are on the run as more acres of tropical forest are destroyed each year by fires that themselves consume oxygen. Yet the atmospheric content of oxygen is stable. A possible explanation: By cultivating high-yield agriculture, humankind has created a new source of this precious element, since growing young plants make oxygen faster than mature trees. The environment, for eons accustomed to change, has simply found a new equilibrium point.

Deep dislike of this kind of thinking runs through ecological doom commentary; somehow the earth is never supposed to change, the only safe course is to stop in place and alter nothing. This is not the way of nature, which has been creating and disposing of species, habitats, and objects as large as continents for spans of time that people cannot fathom. The earth, after all, is a living system; safeguarding its environmental needs may prove more feasible than books such as *Healing the Planet* suggest. □

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Brothers in Arms

Their politics may vary, but Latin Americans share a common culture: murder

by James LeMoyne

A terse summation of the past two disastrous decades in Latin America might read like this: death squads in El Salvador; contras and comandantes in Nicaragua; "dirty war" in Argentina; cocaine cartels in Colombia; jack boots and General Pinochet in Chile; Shining Path guerrillas in Peru. That this grim landscape has at times extended from Tierra del Fuego to Mexico is indication enough that something has been and still is terribly wrong in much of the Hispanic Americas.

Tina Rosenberg sifts through this world of failed hope and achieved horrors in search of the roots of its politics of violence.* The details of her discoveries vary, but her sobering conclusion in several cases is that many Latin American societies are condemned to bloodletting by the precedents of violence and gross injustice that characterize their culture and their history. There will be no easy cure for much of what is awry in this part of the Southern Hemisphere. Improvement is possible, but it is not certain and will be gradual at best in splintered nations such as Peru, Colombia, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

This would once have been considered a fatalistic, even reactionary, conclusion. It is a sign of our age that it now seems almost obvious. In our century, Latin America's malaise has mostly been described in simple cliches referring to poverty, North American imperialism, and capitalist exploitation. Like all cliches, these held, and still hold, a measure of truth. But they do not explain the consistent political failure over so many centuries across the diverse landscape by regimes of such differing political appellations.

Juan and Evita Peron in Argentina, 30 years of generals in Guatemala, Fidel Castro in Cuba, the Ortega brothers in Nicaragua, General Noriega in Panama—the list is long and it almost always adds up to a decline and fall, usually accompanied by bloodshed. Marxists have proved no salvation. Castro in Cuba and Tomas Borge in Nicaragua have sponsored torturers, secret jails, and theocratic absolutism with the same kind of moral logic that braces the hearts of too many Argentine, Chilean, and Salvadoran army officers. In Latin America there is an endless divvying up of the world into enemies and allies. Critics are usually treated as heretics. Secret police and gunmen are integral tools of government. Most Hispanic societies share a politics of envy and a gluttonous appetite for power. There is a consistent inability to reach out, to compromise, to admit mistakes, to pay taxes—to become both citizens and responsible governors.

As Burke understood far better than Lenin, habit is a keystone of political culture. And the fact is that shooting problems, rather than trying to solve them, has been a habit of government in much of Latin America for 500 years. The Sandinista officer whom Rosenberg reports as having been ordered to execute contra prisoners shares a basic belief with both the Salvadoran rightist who guns down trade unionists and with the Colombian cocaine baron who rubs out judges: Violence is a legitimate, proven way to deal with a challenge. Power is a zero-sum game—I will crush you before you crush me.

Guerrillas in their midst

In times of crisis, almost nothing seems to shake this logic. In a wonderful passage of reportage, Rosenberg describes how a well-born, educated young Argentine naval officer, Alfredo Astiz, is even more cold-blooded in his willingness to kill leftists than is the low-brow owner of a plastics factory in El Salvador. Astiz dresses well. Astiz loves classical music. Astiz attends gallery openings. Astiz is regularly promoted in the Argentine Navy. Astiz destroys hundreds of lives.

James LeMoyne has reported for several years on Latin America and is working on a book on Central America.

**Children of Cain: Violence and the Violent in Latin America.* Tina Rosenberg. *Morrow, $25.*

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In Chile, Rosenberg finds that Chileans of the best background and most refined tastes were those least willing to acknowledge that torture had been institutionalized in Chile—and that it was wrong. In Nicaragua, Luis Carrion Cruz, among the most well-meaning and well-bred Sandinista comandantes, helped oversee repression for a new Nicaraguan Interior Ministry that chillingly described itself as the "Sentinel of the People's Happiness" as it regularly tortured prisoners and jailed thousands via party-run kangaroo courts. Good intentions and good education, it appears, aren't sufficient antidotes to violence—a disturbing thought for the well-intentioned and well-read among us.

Rosenberg is excellent at describing such moments of darkness at the most personal level. She breathes life into military goons, fanatical Peruvian guerrillas, Colombian cartel hitmen, and a tired one-time Sandinista army hero ready to sell his tarnished medals. Her book is at its best as a political travelogue. It offers a powerfully written and convincing gut-level view of some of the worst of Latin America's recent history and politics.

But it is less easy to determine why violence has so marked Latin American societies. The reasons are both simple and complex, and as she sorts through them, Rosenberg's analysis becomes debatable.

This book is undergirded by the unspoken premise that Latin America is almost uniquely violent. But the experiences of Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Uganda, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Liberia, Angola, Mozambique, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Iraq, Syria, and Israeli-occupied Palestinian towns are often as bad or worse. Yugoslavia's warring ethnic sects offer new examples of brutality. For that matter, the homicide rate in the growing third world inside the United States is right up there with El Salvador and Guatemala. The major ghettos of Washington, D.C., New York City, Detroit, and Los Angeles are ruled by men with guns who bear a remarkable similarity to the young hoods Rosenberg meets in Medellin, where 20 or more people are gunned down on an average day. And the broad causes seem similar: poverty, a culture that accepts violence, a sense of profound social isolation, an absence of meaning.

Rosenberg argues that such violence is distinct from the state-sanctioned terrorism by police and army officials in many Latin American states. But in some cases, such as Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Peru, we are not looking just at state terrorism. These are societies in which, as in Ireland in its modern moment of mayhem, "things fall apart; the center cannot hold." Or, to be more precise in the case of much of Hispanic America, things have always fallen apart because the center has never been knitted together. It's like today's East Harlem—there is no tolerant social consensus.

That is why it is no surprise that Chile and Uruguay have shown a much greater capacity to recognize the wrong of ruling by murder than most of the other Latin American states Rosenberg considers. Their violence was not endemic—their descent into terror was an aberration. By the blessings of historical coincidence and enlightened leaders, they forged a tradition of decency, citizenship, law, and community. They became violent when their highly paranoid militaries, encouraged by the equally paranoid U.S. government, cracked down after an immature and violent left assaulted a social order that was in need of reform—but not of revolution.

Chile willies

Rosenberg is uneasy in assessing such moments, struggling to weigh the degrees of excess among leftist and rightist men of violence in Latin America. With biblical weariness, Rosenberg has titled her book *Children of Cain*. But she empathizes with the desire to seek radical social reform and perhaps purge Latin America of its original sins. This inclination is more than understandable, but in some cases it keeps her from assessing the faults of the violent left with the same clarity that she uses to judge the violent right. A major part of the tragedy of Latin America is that leftist movements that could have been forces for healing and reform have shared the intolerance that stains Hispanic history.

I was in Chile in 1973 as a fervent, if naive, supporter of Salvador Allende. The people I met in the radical Leftist Revolutionary Movement urged class war in a society that did not want or deserve a war of classes. Several leftist organizers were trained in guerrilla warfare in Cuba. They wanted to distribute weapons and start shooting people. This appetite for violent rebellion does not in any way excuse the brutal effort by General Pinochet to form a military fascist state. But it helps make the hatreds that cut Chile into pieces more comprehensible and may offer clues to understanding Chile's current climate of peace and prosperity.

Because she so dislikes the militarist right, Rosenberg cannot come to terms with Chile's amazing economic success today. She is simply wrong when she states that "viewed in the context of the nation's past, the economic miracle was not so miraculous." Given the abysmal state of nearly all the rest of Latin America, Chile's economic recovery is miraculous by any standard, including Chile's own history. Rosenberg needs to confront that in Chile, as in Spain, a violent rightist dictatorship may somehow have played a significant part in national recovery. If she could unrav-

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el that unsavory, apparent paradox, she would get us closer to the roots of violence and stability in Chile and perhaps the rest of Latin America.

But that kind of analysis would mean discarding her prejudice that the sins of the violent right are unpardonable whereas those of the violent left, because they are seemingly committed with good intent, are at least understandable and perhaps forgivable. Throughout her book, Rosenberg struggles between this kind of reformist approach—which has failed for decades to decipher Latin America—and a more acute analysis that challenges old assumptions.

She is brilliant in describing the sick, closed world of military fascists in Argentina. But her explanation of Argentina's turn to violence again lacks depth because she does not fully appreciate the impact of the violence of the left. Argentina's fanatical Montonero guerrillas helped create the conditions that fertilized military fascism and social corruption. Few want to acknowledge the truth today, but a great many Argentines, perhaps even most, at first silently supported their military's "dirty war" as a necessary measure to destroy a radical left that was kidnapping and bombing its way to public repudiation.

Latin losers

While Rosenberg's chapters on Colombia, Peru, Chile, and Argentina are often thought-provoking, her treatment of El Salvador is less so. Too often she slips into describing the obvious in simplistic terms. She aptly depicts a group of extreme rightist oligarchs and is entirely correct to say that the outrageous greed and violence of the civilian and military right pushed El Salvador into a civil war. But the violent right is only one participant in the politics of narrowness that has poisoned El Salvador. The armed left again shares in a malaise that is spread throughout Salvadoran society.

Too many of the guerrillas who make decisions in El Salvador were trained in Cuba and Vietnam and, until very recently, thought those countries were pretty neat places. They have been in general profoundly undemocratic in their internal decisionmaking, for years offering a closed vision of government by the Vanguard. The guerrillas are far less murderous than the right. But they lost public sympathy by needlessly assassinating mayors, detonating car bombs, attacking polling places, dragooning peasants, and murdering the country's best poet. The rebels, who include some of the country's finest people, are now making long-overdue efforts to democratize. But is it any wonder that the majority of Salvadorans, most of whom are far more tolerant than the extreme rightists Rosenberg describes, do not support the guerrillas?

In Nicaragua, the tragedy and responsibility of the left is historic. The Sandinistas promised pluralism —and then imported East Germans to train the police. The remains of nearly 100 victims of Sandinista State Security agents have been unearthed from unmarked graves. The Sandinistas promised to end corruption. They ended up hopelessly corrupt—looting banks, farms, homes, and most state industries—a development Rosenberg fails to mention. Having claimed to represent "the people," the Sandinistas left office—but only after they stole the door knobs and the rugs.

Any analysis of Nicaragua is made difficult by the Reagan administration's decision to support a peasant guerrilla war against the Sandinistas. That bloody, terrible war helped to cripple Nicaragua and make political moderation impossible. But even within the ambiguity that is inescapable when dealing with Nicaragua, Rosenberg makes large errors.

She starts on the wrong foot by incorrectly describing pre-Sandinista Nicaragua as a system of "absolute privilege, absolute poverty." In fact, one of the striking things about prerevolutionary Nicaragua was that "absolute poverty," now common in the country, was relatively rare. Rosenberg fails to see that Nicaragua was a lousy family dictatorship in need of major reform—but not in need of a revolution claiming it would create a "New Man." Nicaraguans did not want to be "new men." They just wanted a chance to have decent lives under decent leaders.

Rosenberg, normally a very perceptive journalist, wanders so far afield in Nicaragua that she concludes by describing the Sandinistas' electoral defeat as "turning power over to the oligarchy." This not only distorts reality, it turns it on its head. There were rich families in Nicaragua, but there was never a real "oligarchy." A majority of Nicaraguan businessmen supported the Sandinistas in 1979. Many of their children were Sandinistas. A number of powerful people showed a willingness to reform that true oligarchs, such as those found in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Peru, have never shared.

The truth Rosenberg misses is that the only oligarchy in Nicaragua in 1990 was the one created by the Sandinistas. It was a tiny new ruling class of rich, corrupt, and occasionally violent comandantes. These party bosses were thrown out in a free election by a striking majority of Nicaraguans, few of whom are affluent. The government now in power is inept but, again, not especially "oligarchic." In fact, by Latin American standards, it is social-democratic and reformist. Whether democracy will now emerge in Nicaragua is hard to say. But it has a better chance than it did under the monolith of Sandinista control.

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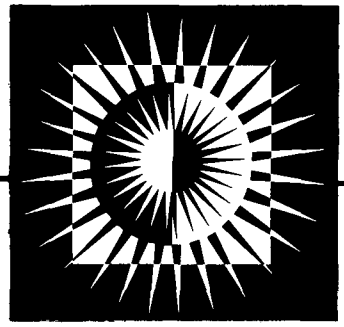
It is now time to face a large truth: The explanation for violence in countries as different as Argentina, Peru, Colombia, and El Salvador is not fundamentally a matter of right and left. Violence is a shared disease that seems to arise in all societies where there are profound social differences, profound exploitation, and an absence of either a compelling ideology to make misery bearable or the human ties that bind men and make them tolerant. Runaway slaves were hung on meat hooks in 19th-century South Carolina. The Sioux Indians were slaughtered by the U.S. Cavalry in the Dakotas a little more than 100 years ago. General Sherman's "March to the Sea" left a swath of burned villages and many orphans.

But Latin America's violence seems to trouble us more than that of many other regions—and it should. First, as Rosenberg strongly argues, after waging the Cold War for 40 years in much of Latin America, the U.S. is responsible for encouraging armies and secret police to follow their worst instincts. For decades, the U.S. government trained, armed, bribed, and otherwise supported dictators and torturers throughout the hemisphere. There is blood on our hands.

At a deeper level, we are all children of the broad New World family that, from very different roots, has sought a democratic method of organizing society. We are linked by a sad history, by geography, and, broadly, by culture. Latin Americans are, in the main, profoundly Western, Christian, and modernizing. They couch their aspirations in the language of democracy, even when they fail to practice it. They are unquestionably our cousins.

The recovery of hope in a country like Chile is tonic to a tired 20th century soul. Its failure, in lands as diverse as Nicaragua and Peru, is poignant and inescapable, especially because we helped trigger Nicaragua's civil war. There is no certainty that these countries will soon evolve into healthy democracies. What is certain is that many Latin American societies will continue to ravage themselves and, at the same time, will continue the struggle to become more democratic. That path is one that may be shared by almost all developing societies in the century ahead.

We should now stop pretending to offer any panacea to peoples in such conditions. The best we can do in the post-Cold War world is to quit playing the role of superpower patron. Affluent states should offer assistance for social rather than military advances. Underdeveloped states should take responsibility for their own actions and failures. This is not a guarantee against further bloodletting. It is, however, an overdue step in that part of the world we have long asserted is "developing"—with little certainty that such "development" would offer a less cursed future to the children of Cain. □



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The Great Ingratiator

How George Bush fools us all

by Robert Shogan

It is only fitting that the first book-length assessment* of George Bush's tenure in the Oval Office has been propagated by committee. More precisely, a team of 11 political scientists have examined the pieces of a presidency the whole of which barely equals the sum of its parts. In the process they have provided a range of informed and sometimes clashing perspectives for examining the myths that underlie the conventional wisdom about Bush's White House leadership.

These myths reflect the minimalist outlook that in the post-Reagan era has come to dominate evaluations not just of Bush but of our entire political system. Fostered by the antigovernment, antipolitics rhetoric of Reagan and the haplessness of the Democratic opposition, the minimalist creed makes a virtue out of the limitations of political leadership. Its impact is to lower standards, shrink expectations, diminish accountability, and convert the political landscape into a wasteland barren of purpose or belief.

It was over this terrain that the last presidential campaign was waged, pitting one candidate who designated himself champion of a competence he could not demonstrate against another whose best-remembered phrase was the ultimately hollow injunction to read his lips. The latter candidate emerged victorious as the prototypical politician of the minimalist era—in the words of coeditor Bert Rockman, "a pastel political personality. . . in a . . . mostly pastel time."

From these pages, three minimalist myths take shape as most important in rationalizing Bush's stewardship.

Myth 1 . . .

The bifurcated presidency: Bush's strength in foreign policy, it is alleged, offsets and arguably even transcends his weakness as a domestic leader.

This myth is intended to disguise the absence of any coherent theme or policy framework, foreign or domestic. No one has done more to promote this notion of schizoid leadership than Bush himself, who with artful artlessness, as Colin Campbell points out, "took the words out of many observers' mouths by styling himself as a foreign—as against domestic—policy president." Last October, when he was up to his neck in the budget deficit and losing ground in the polls, Bush remarked on how he reveled in the challenges of foreign policy, adding glumly: "On the domestic side, here I am with Democratic majorities . . . having to try to persuade them to do what I think is best. And it's complicated."

In another time a chief executive making such an admission would have risked being jeered out of town. ("A president who doesn't 'do domestic'? Come *on!*") But in this minimalist era, Bush's division of presidential labor was accorded the ultimate in solemnization—a *Time* magazine cover story heralding the president as "Men of the Year." "A Tale of Two Bushes," read the headline. "One finds a vision on the global stage; the other still displays none at home."

One of this book's strongest chapters, "The Post-Cold War World," by foreign policy specialists Larry Berman and Bruce Jentleson, serves to debunk the myth that Bush's diplomatic endeavors are informed by the imagination and purpose so conspicuous by their absence from his domestic policies. The chapter also refutes the more fundamental fallacy that the president's burdensome domestic responsibilities can be neatly severed from his more gratifying role as diplomat-in-chief, as if through some sort of lobotomy.

Despite Bush's rhetoric early in his presidency about the need for American leadership to face the challenges of a changing world, the authors write, "no Bush doctrine or grand design existed for meeting the collective security needs of a new world order." Unforeseen events—notably the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the October 1989 coup against Manuel Noriega—offered Bush rich op-

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Robert Shogan covers national politics for the Los Angeles Times *and is the author of* The Riddle of Power: Presidential Leadership From Truman to Bush.

**The Bush Presidency: First Appraisals.* Colin Campbell, S.J., Bert A. Rockman, eds. *Chatham, $16.95 paper, $25 cloth.*

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portunities for leadership. But, they point out, prior to the Gulf war, Bush's responses "tended to be characterized as more *reactive* than *proactive*, more *adrift* than *imaginative*" [their emphasis].

Much the same point can be made about the abortive midsummer Kremlin coup, which enhanced the president's reputation as some sort of latter-day Metternich. In reality, Bush's half-hearted backing of Mikhail Gorbachev left the Soviet president and his perestroika vulnerable. When the rightist renegades briefly seized power, Bush hedged his opposition by dispatching Ambassador Robert Strauss, the mikado of expediency, to Moscow and by holding back from cutting off grain credits. Only as the putsch collapsed did Bush publicly recognize Boris Yeltsin's importance as a rallying point for the forces of incipient Soviet democracy.

"That's a handsome coat," I said. "What poor animal was sacrificed to make it?" Bush never blinked an eye. "We don't bother with animals anymore," he said. "We use humans."

The truth is that in both foreign and domestic policy, Bush has never had a clear sense of direction and never particularly needed one. I remember encountering him on the morning of his first great national political triumph—his upset over Reagan in the 1980 Iowa Republican caucuses. Glowing with confidence, Bush seemed convinced he was all but inaugurated. "You know, you're the frontrunner now," I reminded him. "People are going to want to know what you stand for."

Bush looked puzzled. "I'm just going to keep going," he replied. "I've got Big Mo."

As it turned out, the momentum ran out that year, but the same principle of substituting personal energy for ideas did carry him where he wanted to go in 1988.

As for Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, which are commonly regarded as the central achievements not just of Bush's foreign policy but also of his presidency, the authors fail to critically examine the assumptions on which the policies that led to the war were based. The question of whether Saddam Hussein's threat to U.S. security really required the massive onslaught unleashed against his country is never addressed.

Furthermore, the authors seem to suggest that Bush's adventures in the Gulf represent something of a turning point in his thinking, a step towards formulating a coherent global vision. But they offer no evidence to show that the president's talk of "a new world order" amounted to anything more than an attempt to rationalize his swinging a big stick in the Mideast. To their credit, Berman and Jentleson give the president low marks first for coddling Saddam and then for failing to warn him off before he invaded Kuwait, concluding: "This is a crisis that could have been avoided." They document his inability to offer one clear reason for the war, ticking off no fewer than eight different justifications he put forward at one time or another. And they scold him for the callous disregard that characterized his muddled handling of the rebellious Kurds in the aftermath of the war. Finally, and most importantly, the authors remind us of the reality that foreign and domestic policy are inextricably linked, a reality that Bush and his admirers prefer not to recognize. "A nation that allows its social problems to mount," they write, "may find its claim to moral leadership and the attractiveness of its ideals to be increasingly questioned by other people around the world."

Myth 2 . . .

Bush is a nice guy who finished first in 1988—a conservative, yes, but one with a caring conscience and a commitment to noblesse oblige.

Some contributors buy into this idea heavily. "George Bush has a congenial personality," writes George Edwards in his chapter on "The Public Presidency." "He is warm, sincere, relaxed, and secure . . . he is a person most people like." It is true that Bush has worked hard to create just that impression, and he has succeeded to a remarkable degree, judging by the poll results Edwards cites. Indeed, though he will never be The Great Communicator, Bush can certainly be hailed as The Great Ingratiator.

But the reader has a right to expect more from such a scholarly study than judgments taken from polls. Polls, after all, are based on fleeting impressions derived from mass media all too easily manipulated by the president and his advisors.

Coeditor Campbell adds a measure of balance by pointing out that Bush's conduct in the 1988 campaign ("one of the ugliest in memory") showed the significant dark side of the president's character. In

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his chapter on "The White House and the Cabinet" Campbell adds, "Well aware that the campaign had tarnished his image, the 'spin doctors' went to work in an attempt to show that it had not reflected the true George Bush." They succeeded in generating "a spate of articles" that argued, as one journalist wrote, that Bush had converted himself from "pit bull" to "statesman far removed from the fray of the campaign."

Other contributors not only accept Bush as an upstanding personality, they endow him with a set of ideological beliefs to match. Thus Rockman, in his chapter on Bush's leadership style, describes him as "an old fashioned Tory" whose "style of operation is fundamentally boardroom politics and brokerage among 'proper gentlemen.'" Similarly, another contributor defines Bush as "an American Tory, looking for harmony, social and otherwise."

Surely this is how Bush would like others to see him. But the gentlemanly Tory image is contravened by the behavior of the politician and his chief subordinates. That was no gentleman Bush hired to run his campaign against Michael Dukakis—that was the late Lee Atwater, who, when the campaign was in trouble, turned it against blacks. Nor is that any gentleman whom Bush put in charge of his White House. That is John Sununu, who, when he was in what his boss might have described as deep doo-doo, turned on the Jews. As for Bush himself, it is hard to square the classic Tory's reverence for social harmony with his willingness to manipulate racial tensions—during the campaign by his use of the infamous Willie Horton commercial and now during his presidency by his drumbeat reiteration of the so-called quota issue.

Unfortunately, Bush's exploitation of racial politics is scarcely addressed in this book. Race crops up only briefly, in references to the ugliness of the 1988 campaign and, rather benignly, in the discussion of the ill-fated 1990 civil rights legislation. Bush "certainly did not want to be the third president in history . . . to veto a civil rights bill," writes Barbara Sinclair in her chapter on Bush and Congress. But judging from Bush's post-veto statements and his harangues against the 1991 legislation, which have outraged Democrats and embarrassed some in his own party, it seems clear that a veto—and the chance to inflame the quota issue—is exactly what Bush did want.

On a personal level, it is easy to see how the Mr. Nice Guy myth got started. I shared that view myself when I first met Bush nearly 20 years ago, when he was Richard Nixon's handpicked choice to run the Republican National Committee. The Bush who dealt with reporters exuded charm and civility, never failing to grant an interview request or return a phone call. Yet it was this same Bush who, at the onset of Watergate, launched a smear campaign against a longtime Democratic operative on Capitol Hill, whom he accused on the flimsiest of evidence of having conducted electronic snooping on Republicans years before. Bush's objective was to exculpate Nixon's criminality on the grounds that Democrats did it too—not the sort of behavior one would expect from a high-minded Tory.

As I got to know Bush better I came to realize that beneath that well-bred veneer lurked a broad streak of arrogance. Soon after the 1980 election, as I went through the reception line at a party at the vice-presidential residence, I noticed Bush was wearing a striking suede blazer.

"That's a handsome coat," I said. "What poor animal was sacrificed to make it?"

Bush never blinked an eye. "We don't bother with animals anymore," he said. "We use humans."

Since he came to the White House we have all heard Bush display the same cavalierness in more serious contexts. The most widely noted example was his "Read my hips" rejoinder to questions about his broken promise to oppose tax increases. Another instance, in its way just as brash, was his response after the 1989 state and local elections to the widely heard contention that the negativism marring that campaign was a product of the nastiness that had been the hallmark of his own drive for the presidency in 1988.

"I don't have to stand here and defend the campaign of 1988," Bush replied. "I'd be perfectly prepared to do it, but I was elected."

So he was. And thanks to the minimalists, he has so far not had to defend his presidency very vigorously either.

Myth 3 . . .

Bush is doing as well as could be expected, given the conditions he has had to face.

This myth, which is at the heart of the minimalist case, seems to have been accepted by several contributors. Their reasoning goes something like this: Because of the huge federal budget deficit and the division of power and responsibility between the Republican White House and the Democratic Congress, the 1988 campaign, Rockman writes, was "devoid of policy ideas" and dominated by "symbols and innuendoes." The outcome left Bush in the White House, without a mandate, facing a Congress still firmly controlled by Democrats. "If ever there was a moment when little initiative-taking was exactly the right position to take, that moment was when Bush came into office," Rockman writes. "When nothing was called for it was done well."

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This analysis has at least two basic defects. First, it ignores the real promises Bush made during the 1988 campaign. For all the heavy-handed symbolism about the flag and Willie Horton, Bush said enough about improving education, protecting the environment, and fostering social betterment to persuade voters that he saw a bigger need for government to play a role in their lives than Reagan did. As a result, he obligated himself to propose more in the way of domestic programs than he has chosen to offer. Those unfilled promises helped him carry 40 states.

The second flaw in the "Bush is doing as well as could be expected" argument is that it overstates the political obstacles confronting him. Thus, Rockman writes, Bush's leadership style "tends to blend into a set of political circumstances that offer him slim pickings." Similarly, Sinclair, in analyzing Bush's frustrations with Capitol Hill, seeks to rebut Bush's critics by emphasizing what she calls "contextual factors," chiefly the Democratic majorities in the House and Senate. "The fault is not one of personal frailties, ineptitude, and disreputable motives, as the media often suggests," she argues, "but of structures, incentives, and conflicting policy goals."

Not all her colleagues agree. Paul Quirk, whose chapter on domestic policy is understandably the shortest in the book, concludes that Bush "arguably had the least domestic policy achievement in his first two years in office of any president since the twenties." Though Quirk concedes that part of the problem rests with divided government, he argues that Bush's record reflects as well "his own limitations of style and strategy, his failure to establish a legislative agenda, his willingness to promote least-common-denominator arguments, and above all, his penchant for rigidity and rhetorical excess, especially on taxes." He adds that "it is not difficult to suppose that another president . . . could have accomplished more than Bush did."

Just so. To argue otherwise, to offer "contextual factors" and the absence of a mandate as excuses for nonfeasance in office, is to give up on evaluating Bush's performance and grant him a free ride for the rest of his presidency. "To those looking for social programs as a cure for some of the maladies affecting American society, I suggest they devote their energies to electing Democratic presidents," Rockman advises. But the fact is, many people who voted for George Bush in 1988 did so in part because he gave them reason to believe he would strive to cure those ills and so improve their lives. They are entitled to expect greater value from his leadership than they have so far received. □

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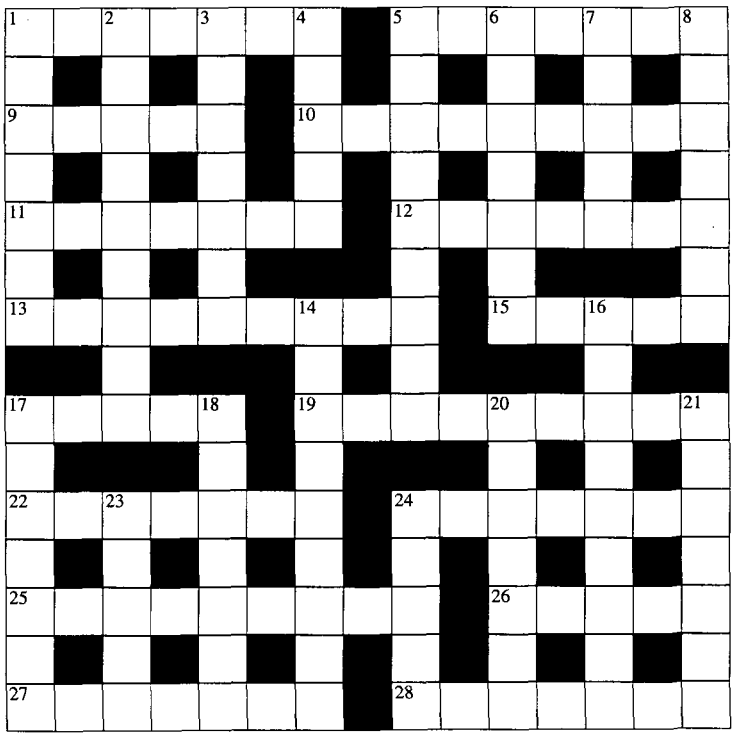
POLITICAL PUZZLE

by John Barclay

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g. (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g. USA, are treated as one word.



ACROSS

1 and 5. A crime alert can transform hemisphere area. (7, 7)
9. Disorganized person returns around first of week and seeks a strike. (5)
10. Ploughed acres in seed returns and gets smaller. (9)
11. Lots of money in favor of air. (7)
12. Discount operations test Lou in a novel way. (7)
13. Country motorists' group curing accident. (9)
15. Audible blows from ceremonies. (5)
17. Positions wild toss outside last of sheep. (5)
19. Tries to trim taxes around queen. (9)
22. Employers' defense displays luck, too. (7)
24. Early man and insect cannot be easily moved. (7)
25. Five demonstrate support. (9)
26. Field around North end is sports site. (5)
27. The rest live around university. (7)
28. Awkwardly abet her attempt to get oxygen. (7)

DOWN

1. Chicagoan shows Caribbean visitor around San Francisco. (4, 3)
2. Tough curriculum for canine senior citizens? (3, 6)
3. Life guard sometimes trailing about terrible curse. (7)
4. Boy takes the Spanish back for utensil. (5)
5. City on a charge slip. (9)
6. Person with choice upset other examples briefly in role reversal. (7)
7. Child uses "I" improperly. (5)
8. Fool sits the wrong way and helps out. (7)
14. Throw grenade at large pet. (5, 4)
16. Will chopped meats in tent. (9)
17. Friend and state come together for talk. (7)
18. Well known in investor, *i.e.*, depositor, circles. (7)
20. Had care performing meaningless act. (7)
21. Place tea suit in order. (7)
23. Sound of the smell of change. (5)
24. Refit brace to be sharp. (5)

Answers to last month's puzzle:

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POLITICAL BOOKNOTES

The Media Show: The Changing Face of the News, 1985-1990. Edwin Diamond. *MIT Press, $19.95.* From his twin perches at New York University and *New York* magazine, Ed Diamond has been watching the media for a good many years now. I have occasionally bumped into him as we've covered the same story (most recently, the *Daily News* strike, during which most of his reporting was indistinguishable from the official management line), and on one memorable evening a few years back, we were bear-baited together on the Morton Downey Jr. show. One of the pioneers of serious media criticism, he works hard at what he does, and though I often-to-usually disagree with him, I take him seriously. But this is not a very good book.

It is a loosely connected series of short-attention-span takes on the behavior of the media—mostly American, and mostly TV, with print and the Soviet Union present largely for purposes of comparison—over the second half of the eighties. Particularly in network television, this was a time of corporate conglomeration followed by—at least in the news divisions—corporate cheese-paring. Though *The Media Show* lacks the vacuum-cleaner exhaustiveness of Ken Auletta's telling of the same story, the processes and outcomes of rampant bottom-linism are generally well reported. What is lacking, as the book's breezy, TV-ish title suggests, is something approaching a theory. Especially in dealing with yesterday's news (and the book is largely composed of recycled magazine material), what happened is less interesting than why.

This is something Diamond knows —indeed something he specifically addresses in considering the changing role of print journalism in a television age. But it is not something he does anything about. Is the decline of network news an inevitable function of private, profit-oriented ownership (Marx, who might at once have been wrong about communism and right about capitalism)? Or does the visual medium itself hold the seeds of its own destruction (Neil Postman, whom Diamond mentions only to dismiss)? Or is this simply progress, and all's for the best in this best of all synapse-straining worlds (Camille Paglia, when she's not getting all bothered by sex)?

To which Diamond's response is, more or less, "I dunno." Put this shrug together with some questionably skewed perceptions—e.g., George Steinbrenner, regularly shredded in the sports pages of *every* New York paper, was according to Diamond "larger than life and free of the pull of mundane judgments"—and you have a problem. Though the book's not so lightweight it threatens to float away, you wouldn't miss a whole lot—on either side—if you half-read *The Media Show* while half-watching the nightly news.

—*Geoffrey Stokes*

Trinity's Children: Living Along America's Nuclear Highway. Tad Bartimus, Scott McCartney. *Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $22.95.* Native New Yorkers Mary and Richard Carter decided to enjoy their retirement someplace more temperate and sedate. They chose a ranch house in Four Hills, an exclusive subdivision perched above Albuquerque, New Mexico. Nestled in the Manzano Mountains, the house abuts what is generally believed to be the U.S. Air Force's largest storage facility for nuclear warheads.

At the edge of the Carter's backyard runs a chain-link fence. On the other side of that fence stretches empty land. In the distance are concrete doors built into the mountains—doors reputed to mask vaults containing cruise missiles, Titan II and Minuteman III warheads, and other offal of the arms race. The Carters do not

Successful management in the '90s takes five things:

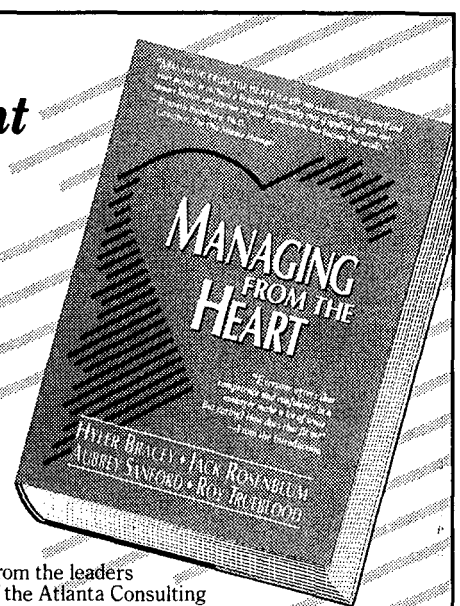
Hear and understand me.

Even if you disagree, please don't make me wrong.

Acknowledge the greatness within me.

Remember to look for my loving intentions.

Tell the truth with compassion.



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mind. They believe the weapons are safely stowed. They don't think about whether they themselves might be a nuclear target. What they do think about is the pleasure of having government-owned land right next door.

"The good thing about it," Richard Carter explains to the authors, "is that there is so much clear area behind the house. And you know that nobody is going to build up against us."

And who could disagree? After all, what truly matters to most of us? The grisly specter of Mutually Assured Destruction? Hardly. What matters is the sanctity of property values.

The Carters are two of dozens of compelling characters Associated Press reporters Bartimus and McCartney found up and down America's "Nuclear Highway"—that stretch of Interstate 25 that begins around Las Cruces, New Mexico, and ends around Casper, Wyoming—during their grim four-year assignment. They visited ranchers living near the Trinity site in New Mexico where the first A-bomb was detonated in 1945; high-tech SDI investors who brought a very temporary affluence to Colorado Springs; an Albuquerque glassblower who learned his art in occupied Poland and now applies it making lasers for Star Wars weapons; young Air Force officers who staff the MX missile silos in Wyoming; and scores of citizens, protesters, believers, and spokespersons who occupy the hot stretch of Western desert that has changed utterly since J. Robert Oppenheimer and his crew sojourned there.

The Carters fall into that category of sturdy citizens (and you can find them everywhere in the world) who prefer not to confront the unthinkable. Worried about the maturity date of their CDs and the health of their tall fescue, these people prefer to ignore the fact that the mild drama of their lives is being lived out, literally, next door to the bomb. They are comfortably afflicted with what Nietzsche called the "will to ignorance." Among them you'll find workers at the notorious (and recently shut-down) Rocky Flats nuclear facility in Denver, Colorado—workers who stopped hanging around their colleague, janitor Don Gabel, when he was dying of a mysterious brain tumor. You'll find John Bartlit, a scientist at New Mexico's Los Alamos lab who heads up an environmentalist group called New Mexico Citizens for Clean Air and Water but, according to this book, declines to tackle the problem of radioactive waste produced by his own employer. You'll find Ken Kirkbride, a World War II veteran who believes the timely detonation of the bomb saved his life. For this reason he agreed to let the Air Force house a Minuteman missile in a silo on his Wyoming ranch and continues to support the idea of nuclear proliferation as a means of nuclear deterrence. Kirkbride's aunt probably feels differently. While the Air Force was digging the silos, they did annoying little things like fail to mark trenches dug in main roads; she unwittingly drove her car into one of them and was crippled for life.

Then there are the *potential* victims of barely averted nuclear mistakes. How many people know that the Air Force accidentally bombed—not once but twice—Oppenheimer's gang at the Trinity site? Or that in 1957, a nuclear bomb was dropped on Albuquerque (but failed to detonate) when an airman fell against the wrong lever? How many taxpayers heard the news when a repairman inserted a test tape into a missile-tracking computer at the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), sending the message that an enemy attack was coming? By now it's public knowledge that the U.S. government misjudged wind patterns when it built Rocky Flats, ensuring that folks living downwind from the facility would be exposed to its emissions. But who heard that Rockwell International, the private firm contracted to operate Rocky Flats, contributed only $10 to the memorial fund of the cancer-ridden Don Gabel? Or that the Department of Energy "lost" Gabel's brain after shipping it off to Los Alamos for examination?

In addition to dredging up these sorry incidents, Bartimus and McCartney show a keen eye for detail. It may not be Pulitzer material, but it's interesting to know that the MIRACL laser (a proto-Star Wars weapon) costs more to run per second than the entire federal government; that as many as six officials may have access to the code that would launch a nuclear strike; that a man named Francis Dellenbach is living in an abandoned missile silo and has painted its doors (which leak) hot pink. True daily reporters, they have amassed an impressive arsenal of fact and outrage.

All of which makes it doubly disappointing that the result of their labors is so hard to follow. Having assembled all this great stuff, the authors decline to write an influential book—or even a very readable one. Instead of setting forth any kind of argument, they confront the unthinkable with platitudes.

Ideally, the book format gives the deadline-whipped reporter more room to play. Repeatedly, however, *Trinity's Children* subjects us to the most shopworn of homilies. Over and over we are reminded that "good fences do not make good neighbors." In their conclusion, the authors manage to insert two of their most oft-used cliches almost simultaneously in an apparent effort to sum up the book without actually *saying* anything. "The people of the Nuclear Highway," they tell us, "have learned that no army ever retreats, that living next to the Bomb can be hazardous, that *you can never put the genie back into the bottle*." And then: "[T]he people of this place that has been on the front lines of momentous history have learned that *there is always a silver lining* in nuclear weapons work." Confronting the biggest bang of all, *Trinity's Children* ends with not so much a whimper as a deliberate flat note. With so many lives on the line, that's a truly disheartening choice.

—Liza Mundy

In the Shadow of the Reich. Niklas Frank, translated by Arthur S. Wensinger with Carole Clew-Hoey. *Knopf, $23*. As a teenager in West Germany during the fifties, Niklas Frank was a great hitchhiker.

"There really were advantages to growing up in the Federal Republic as the son of a major Nazi war criminal," he writes with blunt irony in this book. "All I had to say after a couple of kilometers was, 'Do you happen to realize that I am the son of the Minister of the Reich without Portfolio and Governor General of Poland, executed at Nuremberg as a major war criminal?' "

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That spiel almost always got him warm sympathy, antisemitic tirades, and a free lunch someplace along the Autobahn. During Frank's years of hitchhiking, just one German driver stopped, opened the passenger door, and silently let him out on the shoulder of the road.

Nevertheless, Niklas was embarrassed of his father, Hans Frank. During the next 40 years, his embarrassment became a burning, obsessive hatred. Searching out minute details of his father's life and death, Niklas made visits to old Nazis, to his family's wartime servants, and even (in Albany, New York) to Father Sixtus O'Connor, the priest who had heard Hans Frank say his last words: "Jesus, have mercy." Still, Niklas wanted to know whether the hangman's rope felt rough through the black cloth hood and exactly what sort of snapping sound his father's neck made as it broke.

The entire book is written as a scathing letter to this dead and omnipresent father, addressed in alternating sarcastic and brutal tones. It is a plea to understand coupled with a hatred that precludes the author's understanding. But not necessarily ours.

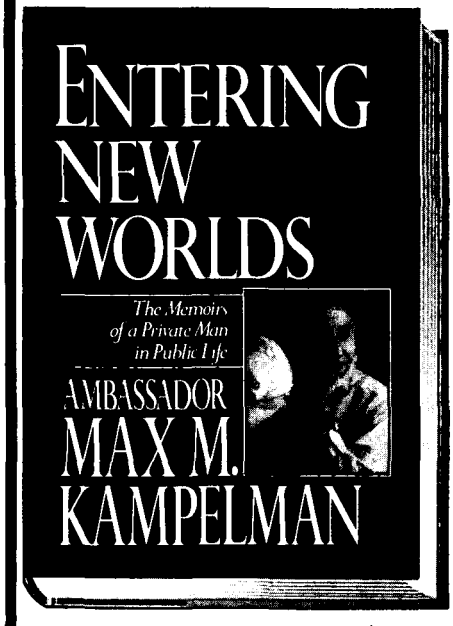
Despite Frank's great efforts to portray his father as an unnatural monster, he comes across as merely pompous, plump, cowardly, and mediocre. According to this book he became a war criminal not because he craved killing Jews and Poles but because he wanted a chauffeured car, a fat paycheck, and a long title to precede his bombastic speeches. In years of poring over Hans Frank's diaries, Niklas found only a handful of quotes that were brutal and even fewer that show hatred of Jews. Most of them are long streams of self-important foolishness that could have been written by politicians anywhere—although the German language lends itself easily to convolutions like, "Unfortunately, in this most violent struggle in the world's history, something arises every now and again, something that surely cannot be reconciled with the glorious German concept of morals, and may I here articulate just what that something is, speaking with full assurance, in a very clear and forthright way." (When he got around to saying so, Frank was referring to corruption, at which he himself was expert.)

This is what makes *In the Shadow of the Reich* different from *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and scores of other books on Nazis. They describe great crimes; this mostly describes foibles. We learn of Hans Frank's childhood sweetheart, his obsession with eggs, his tight-fitting jodhpurs, his enormous bathtub, his excellent Chopin, and his taste for chocolates. Indeed, the only time Hans Frank talked specifically about what was happening to the Jews in his territory, as far as the book recounts, was when he was trying to persuade his wife to divorce him so that he could marry his mistress.

It is a most human, most ordinary portrait, yet throughout the long, ranting book, Niklas Frank does not permit himself even a flicker of affection or a moment of sadness for his father. When he feels a twinge of pity coming on, he stops himself by thinking of photographs from the concentration camps.

Perhaps the conscious, concerted withdrawal of empathy was the only way to learn to hate his father. But in reaching that pureness of feeling, the writer has been unable to deal with a second enemy—himself. Young

The making of a Washington insider—and ambassador to the world



The chief U.S. negotiator at the Geneva arms talks with the Soviets, Max M. Kampelman was also head of the U.S. delegation at the Helsinki human rights conference, and Hubert Humphrey's closest advisor. Yet, this ultimate Washington insider grew up in the Depression-era Bronx, was a conscientious objector in WWII, and was active as a "social democrat," opposing America's homegrown communists. Now he traces the ascent of his career and the evolution of his thinking and shares his thoughts on American presidents with special insight on Kennedy and Johnson and on international leaders including Gorbachev and Sadat.

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Niklas enjoyed butter, eggs, and sausages in luxurious abundance while his father was setting rations below starvation levels for Polish slave laborers. He specifically enjoyed an outing to a place where a jolly man would persuade skinny people to get on the back of a donkey that would buck, throwing the skinny people to the ground. Niklas would stand there and laugh uproariously as the skinny people struggled to get to their feet. He was in a concentration camp.

Niklas Frank never describes how he changed from the teenager who used his father's title to get rides into an adult consumed by shame and hatred. One wonders what forced the metamorphosis, especially since most young Germans today resent being blamed for the sins of their fathers. While those youths are probably justified in their resentment, Frank sees a dark side to their righteousness: "Once again, a choking, suffocating, putrid mantle of political self-glorification has settled down over Germany."

"Because of people like you," he writes to his father, "your Eternal Germany is threatened once more from within rather than from without, and its conscience is like yours—which is to say, it does not exist."

Many people familiar with Germany disagree with that assessment, although Frank, now a journalist covering German politics, is what they call a well-placed observer. His is a powerful recounting of the past. May he be wrong about the future.

—Susan Benesch

Eagle on the Street. Steve Coll, David Vise. *Scribner's, $24.95.* I filed a Freedom of Information Act request not long ago with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). The information I wanted was not explosive in nature nor embarrassing to the agency in any way. My interest instead was historical; the documents I wanted were all at least 20 years old. After much delay, the SEC finally made its decision: It concluded that the only document it could release to me was a press release. Everything else was protected.

So it goes at the SEC, which may well be the most secretive federal agency this side of the CIA. The SEC meets in closed sessions, conducts secret investigations, encrusts its documents with layers of "Eyes Only" classifications. Even the targets of SEC investigations are never told if and when their cases are dropped; to do so would require the agency to tip its hand, which is something it has always been loath to do. Even though this practice seems manifestly unfair to the subjects of lapsed investigations, such notions simply don't rank very high on the SEC's list of bureaucratic imperatives.

For this reason, we must tip our cap to Coll and Vise, two *Washington Post* reporters who have done a remarkable job of piercing the SEC's veil to put together this account of the agency during the tenure of chief John Shad—in effect a study of the agency during the Reagan era. (Shad arrived with Reagan and left five months before George Bush was elected.) Those were tumultuous times for the SEC, for they gave rise to (among other things) corporate raiders, junk bonds, insider trading scandals, leveraged buyouts, the wild bull market and subsequent crash of 1987, hostile takeovers, and so on. The SEC was filled with dissension over the propriety of many of these developments. Shad, a veteran of Wall Street whose view of the SEC before he arrived was that it tended to leap before it looked, became a lightning rod within the agency. He was viewed by the hard-liners as too easy on Wall Street and by the free-market theorists as too intrusive in the natural workings of the market. What amounts to the first draft of this book—a multi-part series that ran in *The Washington Post*— won the Pulitzer Prize.

I don't live in Washington, so I never read that series, but people tell me it was a pointed piece of work. I don't doubt it, because Coll and Vise are both very good reporters. Their basic point was that Shad's natural empathy for Wall Street caused him to rein in the agency at a time when it should have been given even more leeway to ferret out wrongdoing. The result was that crimes like insider trading went undetected far longer than they should have. The lengthier book version attempts to make the same essential point, but something got lost in the translation. In the book, the argument tends to vanish in a muddle of extraneous information: page after page describing long-forgotten investigations into small-time scams; extended forays into policy disputes that now seem stale and arcane; narrative detours that lead nowhere. You get the sense that Coll and Vise are trying so hard to prove they cracked the SEC that they can't bear to leave any of their hard-won discoveries on the cutting-room floor. As for Shad, he winds up looking more foolish for neglecting a sexual harassment suit brought against the agency than for failing to crack down on hostile takeovers.

Further, even when Coll and Vise stick to their main point, they are not completely persuasive. Shad may well have been too quick to believe that everyone on Wall Street was honest, but Coll and Vise err in the opposite direction. They seem to think that anyone who makes a lot of money is, by definition, worthy of suspicion. They note with distaste, for instance, that economist Milton Friedman was one of the first to come up with the idea of currency speculation when he asked his bank back in the late sixties to loan him $300,000 so he could sell short the price of the British pound. (The bank refused.) They add: "[Friedman] didn't digress into why he personally had wanted to wager $300,000, several times the annual salary of a college professor . . . or what exactly he planned to do with all that money if his bet paid off." I suspect he planned to spend it.

Coll and Vise are doubly cursed because their book will undoubtedly be compared with another insider-trading book that's just been published: James Stewart's *Den of Thieves*. The comparison will not reflect well on Coll and Vise. Stewart's book is a compelling narrative that tackles the main event—the crimes of Boesky, Milken, et al., and how they were ultimately brought to justice. It confirms one's sense that Coll and Vise wound up with a subject that was more the sideshow than the real thing. I suppose that's what *Eagle on the Street* is really trying to say, but you have to wonder whether it takes an entire book to say it.

—Joseph Nocera

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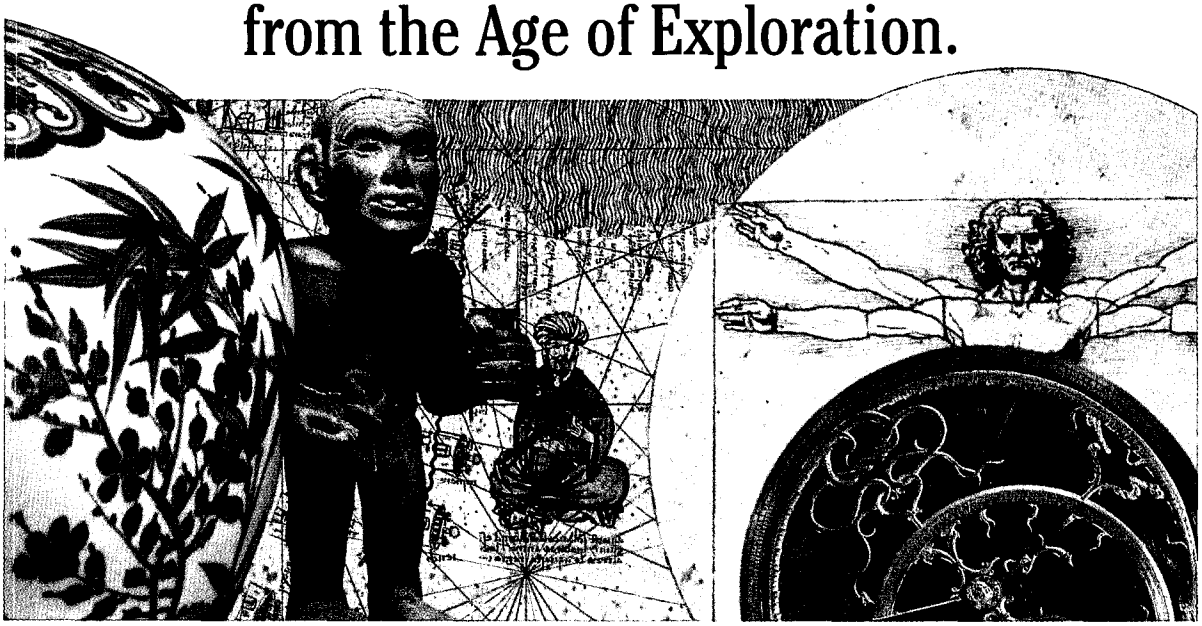

Credits from left to right, details of: Blue and White Porcelain Jar with Plum and Bamboo Decorations, Ho-Am Art Museum, Kyunggi-Do, Korea; Xiuhtecuhtli as an Old Man, CNCA-INAH, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico City; Atlas Catalan, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris; Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian Man, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice; Astrolabe of Alphanus Severus, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg.

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